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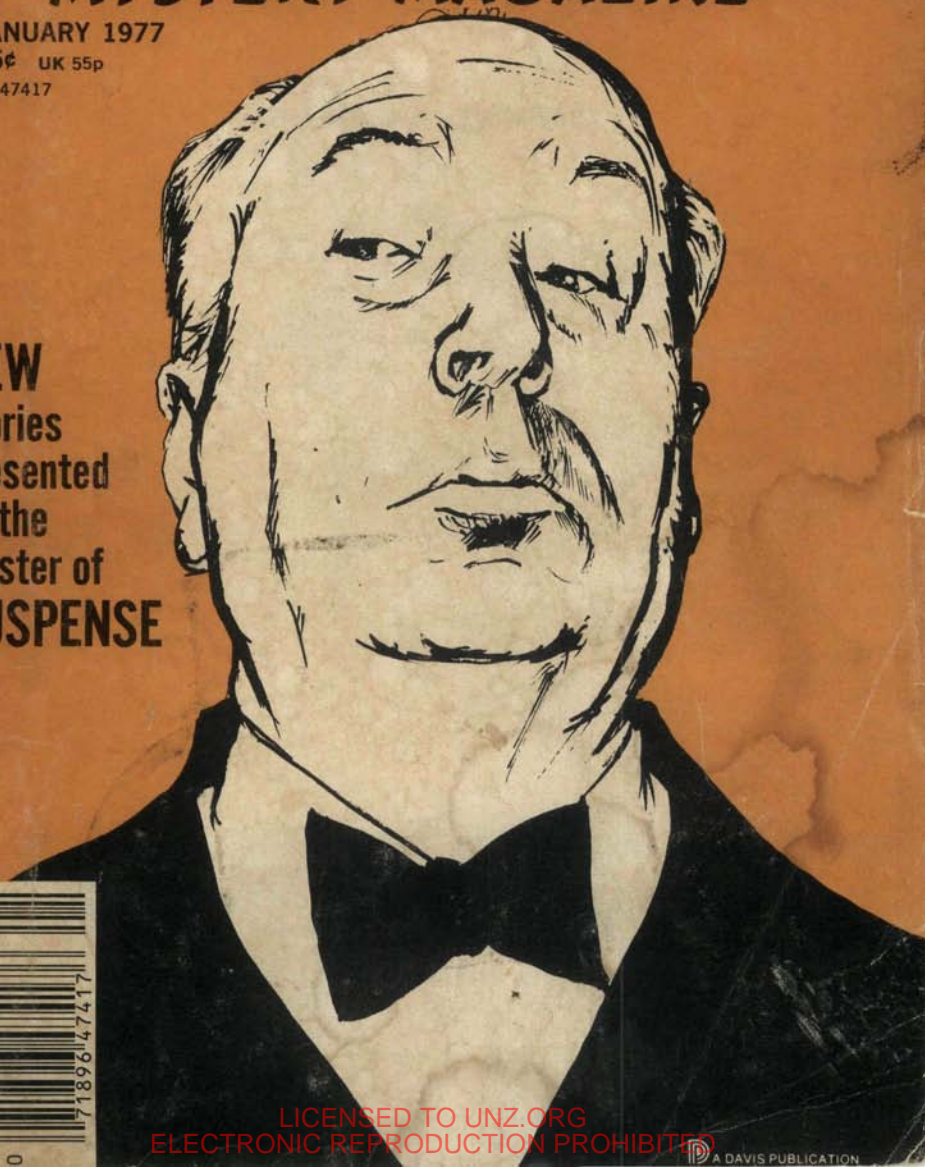
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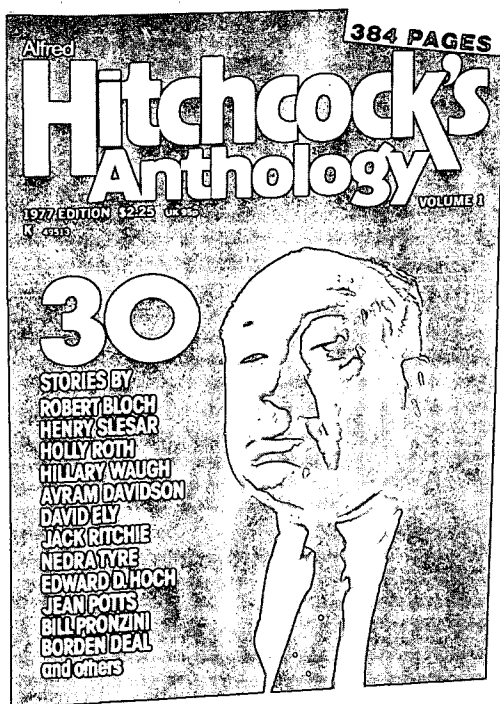


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# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

### CONTENTS

#### NOVELETTE

- THE BLOOD TESTS *by James Holding* ..... 99

#### SHORT STORIES

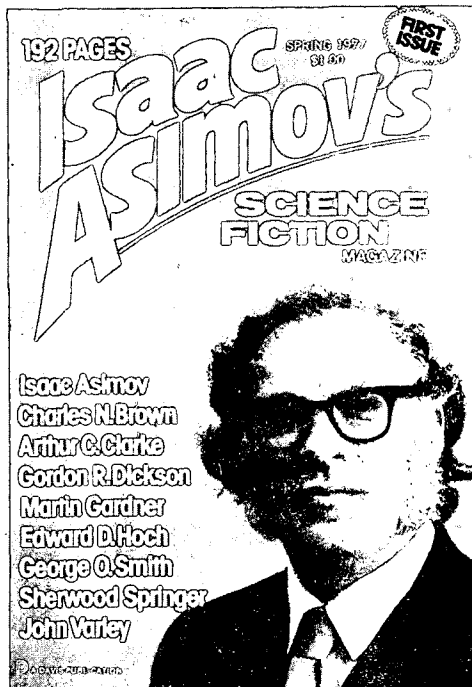
- STRANGERS ON A HANDBALL COURT *by Lawrence Block* ..... 5
- CAT'S-PAW *by Gloria Amoury* ..... 16
- DEN OF THIEVES *by William Bankier* ..... 24
- NIGHTWALKER *by Robert J. Randisi* ..... 39
- MY COMPLIMENTS TO THE COOK *by Jack Ritchie* ..... 42
- THE DIRECT APPROACH *by Richard Laymon* ..... 53
- THE ACCOUNTANT'S WIFE *by Pauline C. Smith* ..... 59
- LADY LUCK *by Edward Wellen* ..... 83
- THE BIGGEST LOSER *by Tonita S. Gardner* ..... 89

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IN OUR REVIEW SECTION**

January 1977



Dear Reader:

I give you fair warning. We have a strange theme this month. Strangeness, I mean. Beginning with "Strangers on a Handball Court"—a title familiar somehow and yet very odd—we have nothing but strangeness for you.

Strange places, strange customs, strange marriages, strange beliefs, strange behavior, strange neighbors, strange interludes, strange business partners, strange deals, strange friends, strange relations, strange winnings, strange losings. It's all very peculiar.

So read on. As Jaques says in *As You Like It*: "Strange places are crammed with observation."

Good reading.

*Alfred Hitchcock*

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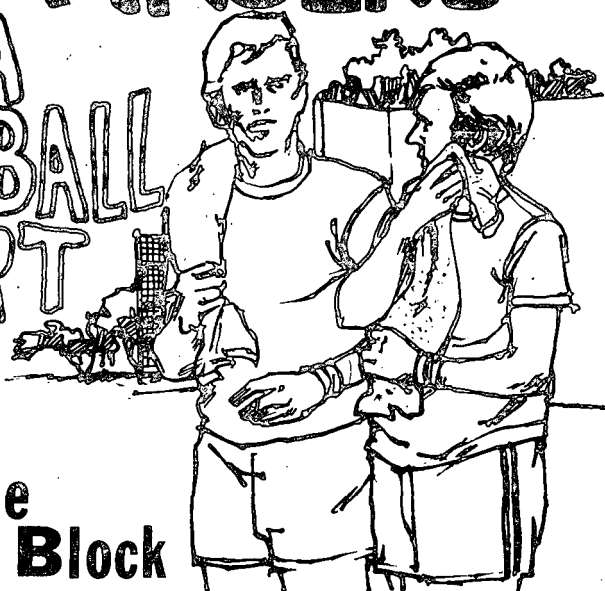
Irving Bernstein, Art Director

*It's a strange thing about strangers . . .*

# STRANGERS

## ON A HANDBALL COURT

by  
**Lawrence  
Block**



**W**e met for the first time on a handball court in Sheridan Park. It was a Saturday morning in early summer with the sky free of clouds and the sun warm but not yet unbearable. He was alone on the court when I got there and I stood for a few moments watching him warm up, slamming the little ball viciously against the imperturbable backstop.

He didn't look my way, although he must have known I was watching him. When he paused for a moment I said, "A game?"



He looked my way. "Why not?"

I suppose we played for two hours, perhaps a little longer. I've no idea how many games we played. I was several years younger, weighed considerably less, and topped him by four or five inches.

He won every game.

When we broke, the sun was high in the sky and considerably hotter than it had been when we started. We had both been sweating freely and we stood together, rubbing our faces and chests with our towels.

"Good workout," he said. "There's nothing like it."

"I hope you at least got some decent exercise out of it," I said apologetically. "I certainly didn't make it much of a contest."

"Oh, don't bother yourself about that," he said, and flashed a shark's smile. "Tell you the truth, I like to win. On and off the court. And I certainly got a workout out of you."

I laughed. "As a matter of fact, I managed to work up a thirst. How about a couple of beers? On me, in exchange for the handball lesson."

He grinned. "Why not?"

We didn't talk much until we were settled in a booth at the Hofbrau House. Generations of collegians had carved combinations of Greek letters into the top of our sturdy oak table. I was in the middle of another apology for my athletic inadequacy when he set his stein down atop Zeta Beta Tau and shook a cigarette out of his pack. "Listen," he said, "forget it. What the hell, maybe you're lucky in love."

I let out a bark of mindless laughter. "If this is luck," I said, "I'd hate to see misfortune."

"Problems?"

"You might say so."

"Well, if it's something you'd rather not talk about—"

I shook my head. "It's not that—it might even do me good to talk about it—but it would bore the daylights out of you. It's hardly an original problem. The world is overflowing these days with men in the very same leaky boat."

"Oh?"

"I've got a girl," I said. "I love her and she loves me. But I'm afraid I'm going to lose her."

He frowned, thinking about it. "You're married," he said.

"No."



"She's married."

I shook my head. "No, we're both single. She wants to get married."

"But you don't want to marry her."

"There's nothing I want more than to marry her and spend the rest of my life with her."

His frown deepened. "Wait a minute," he said. "Let me think. You're both single, you both want to get married, but there's a problem. All I can think of is she's your sister, but I can't believe that's it, especially since you said it's a common problem. I'll tell you, I think my brain's tired from too much time in the sun. What's the problem?"

"I'm divorced."

"So who isn't? I'm divorced and I'm remarried. Unless it's a religious thing. I bet that's what it is."

"No."

"Well, don't keep me guessing, fella. I already gave up once, remember?"

"The problem is my ex-wife," I said. "The judge gave her everything I had but the clothes I was wearing at the time of the trial. With the alimony I have to pay her, I'm living in a furnished room and cooking on a hotplate. I can't afford to get married, and my girl wants to get married—and sooner or later she's going to get tired of spending her time with a guy who can never afford to take her anyplace decent." I shrugged. "Well," I said, "you get the picture."

"Boy, do I get the picture."

"As I said, it's not a very original problem."

"You don't know the half of it." He signaled the waiter for two more beers, and when they arrived he lit another cigarette and took a long swallow of his beer. "It's really something," he said. "Meeting like this. I already told you I got an ex-wife of my own."

"These days almost everybody does."

"That's the truth. I must have had a better lawyer than you did, but I still got burned pretty bad. She got the house, she got the Cadillac, and just about everything else she wanted. And now she gets fifty cents out of every dollar I make. She's got no kids, she's got no responsibilities, but she gets fifty cents out of every dollar I earn and the government gets another thirty or forty cents. What does that leave me?"

"Not a whole lot."

"You better believe it. As it happens I make a good living. Even with what she and the government take I manage to live pretty decently. But do you know what it does to me, paying her all that money every month? I hate that woman's guts and she lives like a queen at my expense."

I took a long drink of beer. "I guess our problems aren't all that different."

"And a lot of men can say the same thing. Millions of them. A word of advice, friend. What you should do if you marry your girl friend—"

"I can't marry her."

"But if you go ahead and marry her anyway. Just make sure you do what I did before I married my second wife. It goes against the grain to do it because when you're about to marry someone you're completely in love and you're sure it's going to last forever. But make a prenuptial agreement. Have it all signed and witnessed before the marriage ceremony, and have it specify that if there's a divorce she does not get dime one, she gets zip. You follow me? Get yourself a decent lawyer so he'll draw up something that will stand up, and get her to sign it, which she most likely will because she'll be so starry-eyed about getting married. Then you'll have nothing to worry about. If the marriage is peaches and cream forever, which I hope it is, then you've wasted a couple of hundred dollars on a lawyer and that's no big deal. But if anything goes wrong with the marriage, you're in the catbird seat."

I looked at him for a long moment. "It makes sense," I said.

"That's what I did. Now my second wife and I, we get along pretty good. She's young, she's beautiful, she's good company, I figure I got a pretty good deal. We have our bad times, but they're nothing two people can't live with. And the thing is, she's not tempted by the idea of divorcing me, because she knows what she'll come out with if she does. Zeeee-ro."

"If I ever get married again," I said, "I'll take your advice."

"I hope so."

"But it'll never happen," I said. "Not with my ex-wife bleeding me to death. You know, I'm almost ashamed to say this, but what the hell, we're strangers, we don't really know each other, so I'll admit it. I have fantasies of killing her. Stabbing her, shooting her, tying her to a railroad track and letting a train solve my problem for me."

"Friend, you are not alone. The world is full of men who dream about killing their ex-wives."

"Of course I'd never do it. Because if anything ever happened to that woman, the police would come straight to me."

"Same here. If I ever put my ex in the ground, there'd be a cop knocking on my door before the body was cold. Of course that particular body was *born* cold, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," I said. This time I signaled for more beer, and we fell silent until it was on the table in front of us. Then, in a confessional tone, I said, "I'll tell you something. I would do it. If I weren't afraid of getting caught, I would literally do it. I'd kill her."

"I'd kill mine."

"I mean it. There's no other way out for me. I'm in love and I want to get married and I can't. My back is to the proverbial wall. I'd do it."

He didn't even hesitate. "So would I."

"Really?"

"Sure. You could say it's just money, and that's most of it, but there's more to it than that. I hate that woman. I hate the fact that she's made a complete fool out of me. If I could get away with it, they'd be breaking ground in her cemetery plot any day now." He shook his head. "*Her* cemetery plot," he said bitterly. "It was originally *our* plot, but the judge gave her the whole thing. Not that I have any overwhelming urge to be buried next to her, but it's the principle of the thing."

"If only we could get away with it," I said. And, while the sentence hung in the air like an off-speed curve ball, I reached for my beer.

Of course a light bulb did not actually form above the man's head—that only happens in comic strips—but the expression on his jowly face was so eloquent that I must admit I looked up expecting to see the light bulb. This, clearly, was a man who had just had an Idea.

He didn't share it immediately. Instead he took a few minutes to work it out in his mind while I worked on my beer. When I saw that he was ready to speak I put my stein down.

"I don't know you," he said.

I allowed that this was true.

"And you don't know me. I don't know your name, even your first name."

"It's—"

He showed me a palm. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know. Don't you see what we are? We're strangers."

"I guess we are."

"We played handball for a couple of hours. But no one even knows we played handball together. We're having a couple of beers together, but only the waiter knows that and he won't remember it, and anyway no one would ever think to ask him. Don't you see the position we're in? We each have someone we want dead. Don't you understand?"

"I'm not sure."

"Did you ever see a movie called *Strangers on a Train*? Two strangers meet on a train and get talking about their problems and decide to do each other's murder. Do you follow me?"

"I'm beginning to."

"You've got an ex-wife, and I've got an ex-wife. You said you'd commit murder if you had a chance to get away with it, and *I'd* commit murder if I had a chance to get away with it. And all we have to do to get away with it is switch victims." He leaned forward and dropped his voice to an urgent whisper. There was no one near us but the occasion seemed to demand low voices. "Nothing could be simpler, friend. You kill *my* ex-wife. I kill *your* ex-wife. And we're both home free."

My eyes widened. "That's brilliant," I whispered back. "It's absolutely brilliant."

"You'd have thought of it yourself in another minute," he said modestly. "The conversation was headed in that direction."

"Just brilliant," I said.

We sat that way for a moment, our elbows on the table, our heads separated by only a few inches, basking in the glow generated by his brilliant idea. Then he said, "One big hurdle. One of us has to go first."

"I'll go first," I offered. "After all, it was your idea. It's only fair that I go first."

"But suppose you went first and I tried to weasel out after you'd done your part?"

"Oh, you wouldn't do that."

"Damn right I wouldn't, friend. But you can't be sure of it, not sure enough to take the short straw voluntarily." He reached into his pocket and produced a shiny quarter. "Call it," he said, tossing it into the air.

"Heads," I said. I always call heads. Just about everyone always calls heads.

The coin landed on the table, spun for a dramatic length of time, then came to rest between Sigma Nu and Delta Kappa Epsilon.

Tails.

I managed to see Vivian for a half hour that afternoon. After the usual complement of urgent kisses I said, "I'm hopeful. About us, I mean. About our future."

"Really?"

"Really. I have the feeling things are going to work out."

"Oh, darling," she said.

The following Saturday dawned bright and clear. By arrangement we met on the handball court, but this time we played only half a dozen games before calling it a day. And after we had towed off and put on shirts, we went to a different bar and had but a single beer apiece.

"Wednesday or Thursday night," he said. "Wednesday I'll be playing poker. It's my regular game and it'll last until two or three in the morning. It always does, and I'll make certain that this is no exception. On Thursday, my wife and I are invited to a dinner party and we'll be playing bridge afterward. That won't last past midnight, so Wednesday would be better—"

"Wednesday's fine with me."

"She lives alone and she's almost always home by ten. As a matter of fact she rarely leaves the house. I don't blame her, it's a beautiful house." He pursed his lips. "But forget that. The earlier in the evening you do the job, the better it is for me—in case doctors really can determine time of death—"

"I'll call the police."

"How's that?"

"After she's dead I'll give the police an anonymous phone call, tip them off. That way they'll discover the body while you're still at the poker game. That lets you out completely."

He nodded approval. "That's damned intelligent," he said. "You know something? I'm thrilled you and I ran into each other. I don't know your name and I don't want to know your name, but I sure like your style. Wednesday night?"

"Wednesday night," I agreed. "You'll hear it on the news Thursday morning, and by then your troubles will be over."

"Fantastic," he said. "Oh, one other thing." He flashed the shark's smile. "If she suffers," he said, "that's perfectly all right with me."

She didn't suffer.

I did it with a knife. I told her I was a burglar and that she wouldn't be hurt if she cooperated. It was not the first lie I ever told in my life. She cooperated, and when her attention was elsewhere I stabbed her in the heart. She died with an expression of extreme puzzlement on her none-too-pretty face, but she didn't suffer, and that's something.

Once she was dead I went on playing the part of a burglar. I ransacked the house, throwing books from their shelves and turning drawers over and generally making a dreadful mess. I found quite a bit of jewelry, which I ultimately put down a sewer, and I found several hundred dollars in cash, which I did not.

After I'd dropped the knife down another sewer and the white cotton gloves down yet a third sewer, I called the police. I said I'd heard sounds of a struggle coming from a particular house, and I supplied the address. I said that two men had rushed from the house and had driven away in a dark car. No, I could not identify the car further. No, I had not seen the license plate. No, I did not care to give my name.

The following day I spoke to Vivian briefly on the telephone. "Things are going well," I said.

"I'm so glad, darling."

"Things are going to work out for us," I said.

"You're wonderful. You know that, don't you? Absolutely wonderful."

On Saturday we played a mere three games of handball. He won the first, as usual, but astonishingly I beat him in the second game, my first victory over him, and I went on to beat him again in the third. It was then that he suggested that we call it a day. Perhaps he simply felt off his game, or wanted to reduce the chances of someone noticing the two of us together. On the other hand, he had said at our first meeting that he liked to win. Conversely, one might suppose that he didn't like to lose.

Over a couple of beers he said, "Well, you did it. I knew you'd do it and at the same time I couldn't actually believe you would. Know what I mean?"

"I think so."

"The police didn't even hassle me. They checked my alibi, of course, they're not idiots. But they didn't dig too deep because they seemed so certain it was a burglary. I'll tell you something, it was such a perfectly faked burglary that I even began to get the feeling that that was what happened. Just a coincidence, like. You chickened out and a burglar just happened to do the job."

"Maybe that's what happened," I suggested.

He looked at me, then grinned slyly. "You're one hell of a guy," he said. "Cool as a cucumber, aren't you? Tell me something. What was it like, killing her?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Hell of a guy. You realize something? You have the advantage over me. You know my name. From the newspapers. And I still don't know yours."

"You'll know it soon enough," I said with a smile. "From the newspapers."

"Fair enough."

I gave him a slip of paper. Like the one he'd given me, it had an address block-printed in pencil. "Wednesday would be ideal," I said. "If you don't mind missing your poker game."

"I wouldn't have to miss it, would I? I'd just get there late. The poker game gives me an excuse to get out of my house, but if I'm an hour late getting there my wife'll never know the difference. And even if she knew I wasn't where I was supposed to be, so what? What's she gonna do, divorce me and cut herself out of my money? Not likely."

"I'll be having dinner with a client," I said. "Then he and I will be going directly to a business meeting. I'll be tied up until fairly late in the evening—eleven o'clock, maybe midnight."

"I'd like to do it around eight," he said. "That's when I normally leave for the poker game. I can do it and be drawing to an inside straight by nine o'clock. How does that sound?"

I allowed that it sounded good to me.

"I guess I'll make it another fake burglary," he said. "Ransack the place, use a knife. Let them think it's the same crazy burglar striking



again. Or doesn't that sound good to you?"

"It might tend to link us," I said.

"Oh."

"Maybe you could make it look like a sex crime. Rape and murder. That way the police would never draw any connection between the two killings."

"Brilliant," he said. He really seemed to admire me now that I'd committed a murder and won two games of handball from him.

"You wouldn't actually have to rape her. Just rip her clothing and set the scene properly."

"Is she attractive?" I admitted that she was, after a fashion. "I've always sort of had fantasies about rape," he said, carefully avoiding my eyes as he spoke. "She'll be home at eight o'clock?"

"She'll be home."

"And alone?"

"Absolutely."

He folded the slip of paper, put it into his wallet, dropped bills from his wallet on the table, swallowed what remained of his beer, and got to his feet. "It's in the bag," he said. "Your troubles are over."

"Our troubles are over," I told Vivian.

"Oh, darling," she said. "I can hardly believe it. You're the most wonderful man in the world."

"And a sensational handball player," I said.

I left my house Wednesday night at half past seven. I drove a few blocks to a drugstore and bought a couple of magazines, then went to a men's shop next door and looked at sport shirts. The two shirts I liked weren't in stock in my size. The clerk offered to order them for me but I thought it over and told him not to bother. "I like them," I said, "but I'm not absolutely crazy about them."

I returned to my house. My handball partner's car was parked diagonally across the street. I parked my own car in the driveway and used my key to let myself in the front door. From the doorway I cleared my throat, and he spun around to face me, his eyes bulging out of his head.

I pointed to the body on the couch. "Is she dead?"

"Stone dead. She fought and I hit her too hard . . ." He flushed a

deep red, then he blinked. "But what are you doing here? Don't you remember how we planned it? I don't understand why you came here tonight of all nights."

"I came here because I live here," I said. "George, I'd love to explain but there's just no time. I wish there *were* time but there isn't."

I took the revolver from my pocket and shot him in the face.

"The police were very understanding," I told Vivian. "They seem to think the shock of his ex-wife's death unbalanced him. They theorize that he was driving by when he saw me leave my house. Maybe he saw Margaret at the door saying goodbye to me. He parked, perhaps with no clear intention, then went to the door. When she opened the door, he was overcome with desire. By the time I came back and let myself in and shot him it was too late. The damage had been done."

"Poor George."

"And poor Margaret."

She put her hand on mine. "They brought it on themselves," she said. "If George hadn't insisted on that vicious prenuptial agreement we could have had a properly civilized divorce like everybody else."

"And if Margaret had agreed to a properly civilized divorce she'd be alive today."

"We only did what we had to do," Vivian said. "It was a shame about his ex-wife, but I don't suppose there was any way around it."

"At least she didn't suffer."

"That's important," she said. "And you know what they say—you can't break an egg without making omelets."

"That's what they say," I agreed. We embraced, and some moments later we disembraced. "We'll have to give one another rather a wide berth for a month or two," I said. "After all, I killed your husband just as he finished killing my wife. If we should be seen in public, tongues would wag. In a month or so you'll sell your house and leave town. A few weeks after that I'll do the same. Then we can get married and live happily ever after, but in the meantime we'd best be very cautious."

"You're right," she said. "There was a movie like that, except nobody got killed in it. But there were these two people in a small town who were having an affair and when they met in public they had to pretend they were strangers. I can't remember the title."

"*Strangers When We Meet?*" I suggested.

*Confucius says much of the virtues of jade . . .*

# CAT'S-PAW

by  
Gloria  
Amoury



That the summons to the old lady's apartment that Tuesday afternoon had been telephoned to me by a cop worried me a little. I'd never been questioned by the cops. And though I had my story ready for them, I wasn't sure what they'd think of it—and me—stacked against her story—and her. But before going into her place I looked through her peephole. Since Papa's never replaced its torn-off inside cover, hers is probably the only see-through door in New York.

Half blind from cataracts, her blue-rinsed hair in fussy curls, she sat among her messed-up possessions talking to a fat old cop and a young one with a crewcut. Through the door I heard her wavery voice.

"Of course the necklace wasn't insured. What's the point of insuring what money can't replace?"

"The jade necklace was all that was taken?" the young cop asked.

"It was enough. It was given to my grandfather, a missionary in China, by a Chinese he converted to Christianity. Confucius says the brilliance of jade represents purity, its hardness intelligence, and its angles—which don't cut although they seem sharp—justice."

"Do you think the girl we've sent for did it?" asked the old cop.

"Her father's key gives her access to this place. And since I hired her to clean it several times she knows where my things are. And she knew of my Tuesday visit to my hairdresser. So yes, I'm sure she did it, and I'm sorry. I expected more of her."

"If the job was done by someone who knew what she wanted and where it was," the young cop said, "why the mess? And why did she tamper with your lock if she used the building key?"

"To throw you off the track."

"How old is this girl?"

"Fifteen. But schooled beyond her years in the ways of evil."

Schooled in holding my own *against* evil, I thought. Still, I was relieved that she didn't tell them who'd "schooled" me. But then, how could she know?

"If she cleaned for you," the older cop said, "her fingerprints are all over the apartment, so we couldn't nail her by finding any."

Right on, Buster.

Before they could come up with a better way to nail me I opened the door with Papa's key and joined them.

The young cop's gaze traveled appreciatively from my hair, which, although it's waist-length, is clean—Tiger won't touch filthy hair on a girl—to my legs. The old guy's eyes turned fatherly. Encouraged, I said, "Mrs. Carpenter, what's happened?"

"You tell us, Penny," Mrs. C. said, pursing her lips.

Looking puzzled, I sat on a chair. The older cop said, "Are you Penelope Green, the daughter of Billy Green, the superintendent of this building?"

I nodded.

"You live in the basement apartment with your father?"

"Yes."

"I'm Detective O'Neill. This is Detective Rouse. We're investigating a burglary that took place here within the past two hours."

I shrugged. "I've warned Mrs. Carpenter about letting in street peddlers and telling them her business, but she comes from a missionary family and thinks everyone can use a few words about the Lord."

She looked like I'd stabbed her in the back. Sorry, old girl, I thought, but it's Tiger and me against you.

The cops looked at each other, then at her. Then at me.

"When we came into this building," O'Neill said, "we noticed the intercom linking the apartments with the downstairs doorlock which, I gather, can only be opened by a tenant's buzz or key."

"That's right," I said, "and the fire-escape doesn't touch the roof or ground unless Papa puts it up or down. He's worked so hard for the tenants' security that it's impossible for an outsider to get into this building without a tenant's help." When I glanced meaningfully at Mrs. C., the cops looked at her too.

"I could hardly admit an outsider while I was out," she said.

"You might have told one enough about yourself so he knew when you'd be out," I said, "and picked that time to hang around until he could slip into the building on another tenant's buzz. Then if, absent-mindedly, you left the latch off the top lock on your door, he might have opened your bottom lock with an ordinary playing-card." I looked at the cops. "For the tenants' protection Papa had this double-locking system put on all the doors."

"No outsider took my necklace," Mrs. C. said.

"What necklace?" I asked.

"A jade necklace," O'Neill said, studying me.

"What's jade?" I asked.

"I explained to you what jade is," she told me, "the morning I tried to convince you of the practical value of honorable behavior. Since you obviously weren't listening to me, you should be able to remember the necklace you were holding. You said you loved the dark-green color."

"Did you clean for Mrs. Carpenter?" O'Neill asked me.

"Yes, sometimes—for her and two other elderly tenants."

"Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts during the past two hours?" Rouse asked.

"Papa can. With school out for the summer, I spend my spare time helping him. I spent the past two hours cleaning our stove. With Mama dead I try to do more for him—keep our place clean." As the cops' eyes warmed with sympathy, I went on. "I saw a magazine salesman ringing apartment bells here yesterday. The tenants weren't letting him in. But Mrs. Carpenter may have—"

"Rubbish," Mrs. C. said. "As much as I dislike discrediting any father before his child, this girl has forced me to tell you that her father's word is worthless. Chances are that during the burglary he was drunk on liquor he stole from the tenants. And her mother isn't dead. After systematically stealing cash from the tenants she evaporated from these parts. Probably with a man."

Having expected this from her sooner, I shrugged as if I was used to hearing foolish talk from her.

"If this family steals from the tenants, Mrs. Carpenter, why do you let them stay?" Rouse asked.

"I can't answer for the other tenants," she said. "Perhaps, like the Millers next door, most of them are couples who don't need anyone but each other and don't much care who runs the building. *I've* put up with the Greens because, as bad as they are, they've been my only people. But that doesn't mean I'll let this girl keep my necklace."

"Mrs. Carpenter is lying about us because we've asked her to keep strangers out of this building," I said. "And she didn't; and she doesn't want to admit she brought the theft on herself."

"Do you admit peddlers and tell them your business?" O'Neill asked her.

"Sometimes. And sometimes I give them coffee. But no peddler stole my necklace. If you give it back to me, Penny, I won't press charges."

"I can't give you what I don't have," I told her.

"You can't accuse anyone without proof, Mrs. Carpenter," Rouse said. "We'll talk to the girl's father and check out what leads we have."

"If you don't get my necklace back, officer," she said firmly, "I will. At cost to Penny."

Although the cops must have noticed that Papa wasn't altogether sober when he told them I had cleaned the stove during the time of the burglary, I guess they decided that his condition didn't necessarily

rule out truthfulness. Anyway, they didn't request me.

The old lady changed her top doorlock and refused to give Papa the key. She told me she'd never again let me clean for her, which didn't bother me as I'd never liked working for her. She told the Millers and several other tenants to change their locks but no one did.

What did bother me was that she began to follow me around.

In the supermarket I'd spot her watching me with her weak eyes. She began to sit in the apartment-house lobby, watching me. When I saw her at our hangout, a coffee-shop down the block, having tea and toast at a table near mine, I told my friend, Matilda Harrow, about my trouble with her. "She's hoping to catch you wearing the necklace," Matty said. "It's the only way she can prove you took it."

"She should know I wouldn't be that stupid!"

"She thinks you might be that vain."

Deciding that Matty was probably right, I shopped around for a cheap look-alike necklace, bought it, and started wearing it. In no time I was faced by O'Neill and the old lady, who triumphantly pointed to my throat.

"Miss Green," he said, "may I examine what you're wearing?"

I took off the green necklace and handed it to him.

"These are glass," he said.

I watched her face fall.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, Mr. O'Neill," she said. "My eyes—"

Tiger wasn't impressed with her necklace.

With his handsome orange beard spilling over his red shirt, he examined it, along with the other items he says are too hot to pawn, and said disgustedly, "Why'd you take this? Beads this shape are so recognizable they might as well have the owner's name on them."

Fighting tears because I hadn't pleased him I said, "You weren't so fussy before Ruth Garvey got that job at the Jewel Emporium."

"Ruthie brings me diamond chips and gold that nobody can identify!"

"I do the best I can in this building."

"Any pawnbroker would recognize this pearl-and-coral pin on a cop's list of stolen goods," he said.



"There's nothing else *valuable* in this building."

"What about the other old ladies you clean for?"

"One gave her valuables to her daughter who visits her. The other keeps hers in a safe-deposit box."

"Your Mrs. C. must own things worth more to me than this. If I could search her place I'd find them."

I thought it over. "You'd better not. I had a hard enough time getting the cops off my back on this job."

"But you did get them off your back. These days, in any burglary, the cards are stacked against the victim. All the thief has to do is get away from the place with something that can't be easily traced and then keep his mouth shut. You get me into Mrs. C's apartment and I'll take care of the rest."

"I don't have the key to her new lock."

"No locked door can keep me from where I want to go. Just let me know when she's out."

Although I wasn't comfortable about arranging it so soon after the necklace job, I couldn't afford to lose Tiger. So I told him the old lady's schedule.

Then, as if she'd guessed what we were up to, she changed it. She quit going out. She had her groceries delivered and rinsed her own hair. It was like she'd decided to spend the rest of her life guarding her things. Which convinced Tiger that he was right to suspect she had things worth guarding.

"I've got an idea," he told me one August afternoon after she hadn't put her nose outside her door for a month. "What's the old girl's telephone number?"

After I'd found it in the phonebook, Tiger dialed it.

"Mrs. Carpenter," he said smoothly, when she answered, "this is Joe Gaskel. I'm the owner of a pawnshop on Fifty-seventh Street and Eleventh Avenue. I have here a jade necklace the police think may be yours."

From across the room I could hear her excited squealing and I knew she'd be outside hailing a taxi in minutes.

Which Tiger and I, from our window, watched her do.

"By the time she realizes she's been had and tries to get back here in another cab," he told me, "she'll be delayed by the evening rush-hour. We have plenty of time."

Working so quietly that the Millers wouldn't hear a sound if they were home Tiger, with Papa's tools, lifted her door off its hinges.

Inside, I watched Tiger's nimble fingers rake through her bureau drawers. Hidden among her lavender-scented slips he found five gold bracelets. "Eighteen-carat," he said. Among her kitchen spoons he found six he said were platinum. Behind an album filled with yellow photographs he found a transistor radio.

When we had all we could carry, we left. Tiger replaced the door.

If the old lady told the cops about the second burglary they didn't question me about it. As Tiger said, the second job must have completely cleared me of their suspicion about the first.

He rewarded me for my part in the job by giving me a pair of diamond-chip earrings Ruth had swiped from the emporium.

After the second burglary Mrs. C. started having her hair done outside again and got a new girl in to clean for her. Outside of snubbing Papa and me, she gave no sign that anything had happened.

Which was fine with me.

Until three o'clock one morning in September.

The ringing telephone woke me up.

As Papa was smashed the night before on the liquor of three tenants who were away on vacation, I knew he wouldn't hear the phone, so I answered it.

It was Mrs. Carpenter.

"Penny!" she cried. "My apartment's on fire!"

I woke up fast. Glad that Papa had taught me to keep my head in an emergency, I called the fire department. The firemen banging on our door woke Papa, who, cursing, lowered the fire-escape to the ground.

The firemen cleared everyone out of the building except Mrs. C., who wouldn't or couldn't open her door. Then while the other tenants, Papa, and me watched from the street, a fireman climbed the fire-escape to Mrs. C.'s fourth-floor window and broke it.

"I hope she's all right," Warren Smith from the fifth floor said anxiously.

"Why didn't I smell any smoke?" Mary Herman, his next-door neighbor, asked.

"I still don't smell any," Papa grumbled.

After awhile a fireman came out and told us that the fire was out. . .

Papa and I found her in her bathrobe in our place. With Officer O'Neill. Spread out on our dining-room table were the illegal contents of my drawer.

And the old witch was wearing her jade necklace.

"A peddler I let into my place must have thrown a lit cigarette into my wastebasket," she said. "When the fire broke out I came down here for you, Mr. Green. Your door was open. I found this stuff all around."

"It wasn't left around," I said thoughtlessly. "You found it in my drawer."

"What was this charm bracelet, reported stolen by Margaret Foster three months ago, doing in your drawer?" O'Neill asked me. "And this pearl-and-coral pin, stolen from Mrs. David Brown?"

"And my necklace," said Mrs. C., lovingly fingering it.

"They were given to me," I said. "By my boy friend."

"More likely you took the things to give to your boy friend," O'Neill said. "George 'Tiger' Fenwick."

"Who's George Tiger Fenwick?" the old lady asked.

"A local charmer who, we suspect, has a dozen teenage girls plundering jewelry stores and apartments for him. He invests the proceeds in drugs he pays teenage boys to push for him."

"That's a lie!" I cried. "Ruth and I are the only ones who steal for Tiger! And he's saving the money for our future—we're going to get married!"

"He'd better start saving for attorney's fees," O'Neill said. "With what you've admitted and this stuff as evidence, we have enough to nail him. Meanwhile, you come along with me."

When Tiger finishes his time and I finish mine here at the proctory where I'm being "rehabilitated," I'll manage to convince him I didn't help nail him. Then our dream will come true, I know it will.

Papa visits me when he can.

He gives me news of Mrs. C., whose lease has another year to run. If she's been accused of calling in a false alarm, I haven't heard of it. But then, come to think of it, I'm the one who called it in.

A social worker here called me a cat's-paw today. I don't know what that is, but I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of asking. I wonder if it could have something to do with Tiger.

*As the psychiatrists say, it's important to keep in touch  
with your feelings . . .*

# DEN OF THIEVES



**WILLIAM  
BANKIER**

**M**arvin Kelly had not felt his left arm in over a day and he was beginning to wonder if the circulation would ever come back. He decided to involve the bellboy in his troubles. It was his way of facing the corrosive depression that seemed to wash around him these days, to natter on at Sammy Luftspring and make him laugh. His own laconic voice echoing in the hotel lobby, a solitary vaudeville turn for an audience of one—that was Marvin Kelly's safety valve. That and the booze.

"Sam, you'll have to help me light this cigar. This is a two-hand lighter and my left arm is hanging like a salami inside my sleeve. Thank you, my boy, thank you. You're a gentleman and a scholar. To look at me, would you think you were seeing a man who broke a lady's heart last night?"

"Lady's hearts don't break," Sammy said. "They bend and snap back."

"You may be onto something. Beneath that bedraggled exterior lurks the soul of a philosopher." Marvin was right about the bellboy's exterior. Sam's hair was long and glistening with vaseline. His white mess jacket was spotted, his trousers ankle-high and wrinkled, his shoes warped. He looked as though he had recently climbed out of a river.

"But Miss Araby Fenn expressed profound disappointment in me last night," Marvin went on. "She feels that a man who lies on his own arm for eleven hours in a drunken stupor is what you might call self-destructive."

Marvin stood sideways behind the desk staring out through the front window at the deserted Market Square. His hair was so pale it was almost invisible and the tilt of his head angled his glasses so they reflected the light as two opaque discs. He was a slight, compact man who handled situations intellectually, so that nobody knew whether he was really strong or not.

Sammy Luftspring scuffed across the tile floor and threw himself into one of the huge leather armchairs. Sam abused himself and everything he came into contact with, walking, sitting down, talking. Now he said,

"I got the dropsy and heart trouble. I drops into a chair and I haven't the heart to get out of it." So went the desperate banter of people imprisoned in uneventful lives—Baytown on a Sunday afternoon.

Then the brass-plated glass doors were pushed open and a giant entered the lobby. He seemed to fill the room, a Mardi Gras balloon of a man, his ruddy face carved in a glittering smile, his inflated body clothed in formal black even to the unseasonal homburg hat. He was not wearing a flowing cape, but his posture suggested one.

"Mr. Danforth, please," he said, "Mr. Jack Danforth." He swept off the black hat and set it on the desk. His forehead was high, tanned,

and gleaming. His hair was gunmetal grey and parted in the middle.

Marvin took two steps back and did his sideways turn, head tipped, eyes blank. Stage left, Sammy Luftspring allowed a cigarette to hang from his lower lip. "I'm sorry," the desk clerk said, "but Mr. and Mrs. Danforth are in Montreal for a few days. A little holiday."

The visitor closed his fist and pounded the mahogany desk. "What a shame. I was counting on surprising old Jack. He'll be sorry I missed him." He turned and saw Sammy for the first time. "My name is Raphael Spicer. I'm in real estate in Winnipeg. Jack Danforth and I go back a long way together."

Spicer sat down in the chair facing Sam's and complained for a while about the circumstances that saw him driving down to Baytown on a day when his old friend Jack was in Montreal. Then he asked for notepaper and an envelope, wrote a message to Danforth, sealed it, and left it with the clerk.

Kelly was finding the big man's presence oppressive and hoped he would soon be on his way. But Spicer said, "I could do with a cold drink. Why don't I buy us all a beer?"

"In Ontario, on Sunday afternoon," Kelly said, "the beverage room is closed. But Sammy can get you a carbonated drink from the kitchen."

He got three, and then they had to hang around feeling obliged to listen while Spicer went on about how he had met Danforth years ago when they were patients in a heart clinic in Toronto. They had gone through the same program of exercise for the diseased muscle and had responded to the same medication. Then they had gone their separate ways, meeting now and again, exchanging letters, bound together by their common experience.

"Mr. Danforth's been remarkably well," Kelly said. "He hasn't had an attack in a long time."

"That's because he takes care of his body. Always did." Spicer made a tragic face. "Wish I could say the same for myself."

Sam, not being tied to the desk, got up now and retreated through the doorway to the back room, taking the empty bottles with him. Kelly envied him; the bellboy would go now and sit on the parapet above the river, watching for the movement of catfish in the green water below. At this time of the afternoon, the sunlight would be turning the Bay Bridge into silver and a fine breeze would begin to stir the rushes along the river's edge.

Spicer talked on and on about baseball, and about inflationary pressures on the real estate market, and about the love affairs of a television actor he knew. Kelly said things like, "Yes. Mmmm. Aha." Then came the bad news. Spicer announced he had decided to stay for dinner and that he intended to have the desk clerk as his guest.

Marvin was just about to invent a prior engagement with Araby Fenn when Spicer suddenly sat bolt upright, peered out the window, shouted "Hey!" and raced from the lobby with spectacular speed for a man his size. He was not gone long and he returned a different person from the one who ran out. His head was down, and he seemed smaller inside the great black suit.

"Damned kids," he gasped, "all over the car. Bent my aerial." His chest heaved alarmingly. He slipped a hand inside his jacket, pressing against his rib cage.

"Are you all right?" Marvin lifted the hinged board and came out from behind the desk.

"Damned stupid thing to do. Shouldn't run. I could kill myself." He spoke between intakes of air.

"Maybe you'd better lie down."

"I need my medicine. There's some in my bag. It's locked in my trunk. Too far."

"I'll get it."

"No. Jack's room. I must have some. Same as mine. Take me there."

"Can you move?"

"Slowly. Slowly."

Marvin called for Sam and together they helped Raphael Spicer down the hall to the Danforth's private suite at the back of the hotel. Sam used his passkey and they were inside the cool, dim, carpeted rooms, more elegant than any of the guest accommodations upstairs. They lowered Spicer onto the bed, his wallet tumbling from his jacket to the floor, Sam fumbling for it with one hand and setting it on the bedside table.

The pills were in the medicine cabinet. Marvin brought them with a glass of water and handed both to the ailing man. He sat up and said, "I'll be okay now. You're lifesavers, the both of you. Just let me rest."

"I could try to phone a doctor. It isn't easy in Baytown on a Sunday."

"Not necessary. I'll take a pill and rest for a while."



He sank back onto the pillow with a sigh. Marvin and Sam carried the threatening sound of it back to the lobby with them where the desk clerk said,

"How will we explain it to Mr. Danforth that we let a stranger come in here and die in his bed?"

"He's not a stranger," Sam said. "He's a spooky old friend." As if that made it all right.

The way things turned out, it might have been better had Raphael Spicer expired. Mr. Danforth returned on Tuesday, pacing quickly into the lobby with the confident shuffle of the experienced middleweight, scowling over the stump of his dead cigar. Then, finding nothing in sight to attack and vanquish, he said to Marvin and Sammy, who happened to be on duty again, "Well, boys, what's been happening?" They were all boys to him; the waiters, the chef, the boiler man.

"Very quiet, Mr. Danforth," Kelly said. No point in mentioning his still-dead arm. The boss might not be keen on employing the handicapped. Besides, there was a slight tingle in it these days.

"Oh yes." He found the note and presented it. "An old friend of yours dropped in on Sunday afternoon. Left you this, Mr. Spicer."

"Spicer. Spicer." Danforth held the note like a live bat, fluttering at arm's length. "Doesn't ring a bell with me."

Suddenly it did with Kelly—the resonant clang of doom. He glanced at Sammy Luftspring who put on his I-wasn't-there-and-I'm-not-going-to-be-here-much-longer face. "He knew you at the heart clinic in Toronto, he told us. Me and Sam. Matter of fact, he had a seizure right here and we let him lie on your bed for a while. Gave him a couple of your pills. I hope that was all right."

"Marvin," Danforth said, "I don't mind you ministering to the sick when necessary. But I never heard of your Mr. Spicer."

Kelly resented the way the mysterious stranger was being attributed to him like a figment of his imagination or a needy relation. Now Mrs. Danforth entered the lobby, stylish and sexy and stout. She was an olive-skinned woman of some Middle Eastern stock, wildly alien to Baytown and one of the main reasons why Kelly came to work in the mornings.

Danforth said to her, "Follow me," and they walked down the corridor to their suite. The desk clerk said to the bellboy, "Do you get the

feeling we did a silly thing?"

"I get that feeling every time I put on this jacket," Sam said.

A roar from the end of the corridor brought Kelly on the run. In the elegant sitting room Mrs. Danforth was, appropriately, sitting; Danforth was standing in front of a wall frame which was open on hinges; and, behind it, a round steel door was also open.

"Describe Mr. Spicer to me, Marvin," he said.

Kelly found it easy to do so.

"Now I know who it is," Danforth said. "We met for the first time at a party in Montreal last Friday. He's a fancy guy. Very fancy."

"You mean all that about the heart trouble . . ."

"Was stuff he got out of me. We were drinking and I guess I did most of the talking. As for this," Danforth indicated the safe, "he mentioned a real-estate deal I could get into with ready cash. I said I had some. And cheer up, Marvin, I'm a lot stupider than you. I blabbered on about the money I don't keep in the bank. Always available for a good deal like Spicer's. He probed me like a psychiatrist. I suppose the liquor helped him."

"How much is gone?" Kelly held his breath.

"Twenty thousand dollars, my boy, in used bills. But not by me, damn it."

Marvin moved towards the phone. "I'll call the police. I'll get Don Cleary over here."

"You'll call nobody. Spicer, which can't be his real name, knew what he was doing. That money has never been through the books or through the bank. The tax people don't know about it. If I start making a noise, it could all lead to some sticky accounting. We'll have to leave it lie."

Mrs. Danforth was looking at Kelly with smoldering eyes. He felt that where she came from, he would be buried in sand to the chin and left for the ants. "I'm sick about this, Mr. Danforth. I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," the hotelman said. "Let's see what Mr. Spicer has to say." He opened the sealed envelope and shook out the page of bold handwriting. He read in a sarcastic tone,

"Dear Jack:

Sorry we only met once, but once was enough. Thanks for sharing the old ill-gotten gains with me. Don't fret about it—

pretend you paid your taxes.

With genuine appreciation,  
Raphael Spicer  
(also known as)

At the end of their shift that afternoon, Marvin sat with Sammy over cups of tepid coffee in the Paragon Café. He craved a beer but he also wanted to talk to Sam, and the bellboy, at 17, was too young to go into the beverage room.

"He was so decent about it," Kelly mourned. "I would have killed me."

"Danforth is an old battler. He knows you can't win 'em all."

"Well, I want to win this one. I hate being burned like this." Kelly's sensitive face was twisted with bitterness. "Trouble is, we don't even know the guy's name, or where he comes from."

Sam lifted his coffee cup. "Good double feature at the Capitol," he said. "Wanna see a movie?"

"Sam. What do you know that I don't know?"

Eventually, the boy had to come clean. When Spicer's wallet fell to the floor at the bedside and Sam picked it up, a credit card dropped out of it. Sam pocketed this because he had a friend who would pay for such items, going to the loser's city and charging up a small fortune in consumer goods before the loss was reported. They looked at the plastic card together. It told them they were after Otto G. Noble, 911 Sherbrooke Street W., Montreal.

"You realize it's against the law for you to have this card in your possession," Kelly said, his heart pounding with excitement.

"Yeah. And isn't it beautiful," Sam said.

That night, Marvin talked to Araby Fenn over dinner in her tiny apartment on the third floor above the library. He told about the robbery and explained how he and Sammy were going to Montreal. With a name like hers, Araby should have looked at least as exotic as Mrs. Danforth. There should have been the tinkle of ankle bells as she entered a room, the whiff of incense, a flicker of veils. But Araby Fenn looked like what she was, the librarian at Baytown Public Library. She wore her braided hair coiled on top of her head and dressed in the sort of blouse and skirt she had worn as a high-school girl when Kelly first

met her at a tea dance and discovered that she could follow his erratic fox-trot.

She had a big, cool, intelligent face and she loved Kelly so much it scared him.

They ate in Araby's kitchen amid the smell of scrubbed oilcloth and soft butter, with a half-full milk bottle tucked in the shade of the window ledge because the fridge was on the blink. She asked him, "Why chase after this man? He may be dangerous."

"I doubt it. Only elusive."

"Then you won't catch him."

"Yes we will. Because he doesn't expect to be caught."

Araby had kept all her old .78-rpm records, so now, when most people were listening to various kinds of rock, she put on Harry James playing "Velvet Moon." Kelly didn't complain. Then she sat beside him on the sofa and leafed noisily through the weekend rotogravure section, wetting her thumb to turn the pages. Kelly didn't even complain about that, although it smacked of rocking chairs and front verandahs and old gray heads.

"How's your arm?"

"Getting better. Only just."

"Is that why you haven't hugged me tonight?"

He embraced her then, doing the best he could with his weakened arm, finding her lips as soft and comfortable as ever. And, as usual, the two floors of the public library below him seethed like a volcano. Kelly was always conscious of the terrible mass of energy in the books stored down there. They represented adventure and danger and challenge in distant places—everything his life now lacked. But the game was not over. There was still time for him to make a move and become the man he could live with in his old age. He was only afraid that if he married Araby, he would sink back into Baytown forever.

Only one train a day stopped at Baytown bound for Montreal. Marvin followed Sam aboard and as they threw their satchels onto the overhead rack, the desk clerk said, "Kelly and Luftspring, luggage of distinction."

"If you're going to be self-conscious on this trip," Sam said, "I'm getting off in Napanee."

"Do," Kelly urged him. "The train doesn't stop there."

Tension built during the four-hour journey and was not alleviated by Kelly's refusal to discuss his plan.

"Suppose we do find him," Sam said, staring at cows on a scrubby Quebec field, "how do we get the money off him? We have no guns or swords."

"I have an idea."

"Such as what?"

"You'll see." Kelly was afraid to say any more. His plan was so simple it might sound inane and he would lose the inclination to make the attempt.

They took rooms at the Central YMCA on Drummond Street. Then they went into a tavern and had wieners and beans with buttered rye bread and three glasses of beer each. Most of the conversation going on around them was in French. Sam ate and listened with the dazed face of the Baytownner newly out of his element.

"These guys don't even talk Canadian," he said at last.

"I'd watch it," Kelly told him. "You can't understand them, but they can understand you."

They went outside into mid-afternoon sunshine and asked the way to Sherbrooke Street. The building they wanted was within a ten-minute walk. It looked new, twenty-three floors of thrusting glass and concrete. There was a uniformed guard at the desk in the lobby. He stared suspiciously at Sam's long hair, but Marvin addressed him as "My good man" and they were soon in the elevator on the way to Otto G. Noble on the nineteenth floor.

"I'm curious to know what you're going to say when he opens that door," Sam said.

"I just had a different thought," Kelly replied. "What if Spicer stole that credit card and this isn't even his place?"

That doubt was erased when the apartment door was opened, not by Raphael Spicer but by a young woman who had to be his daughter. She had the same impressive stature, the large eyes, the high forehead. But she was best identified by the inherited theatrical stance. She should have been costumed in deep sleeves and a pointed hat with a veil attached to the tip rather than in the green velvet trouser suit she was wearing.

"Is Mr. Noble at home?" Kelly asked.

Something was worrying her. "No, he isn't right now. I'm sorry."

"Oh. We're friends of his, we've come down on the train from Baytown. It's an important visit really."

She looked at Kelly, not registering for a minute. Then his words got through. "Come in then. Forgive me, I'm not thinking straight today." They followed her into the apartment, which was panelled and carpeted and furnished with fat chairs that hugged the floor. One entire wall of glass looked out over a dizzying view of rooftops, spires, and distant bridges.

She was Hazel Noble and she was glad to know them. She had a sweet, genuine smile. Her father's size and flair had come down to her, but not his character. She got them drinks and they talked of train rides and city traffic while the air buzzed with secrets. She finally got as far as telling them Noble had not come home last night and that this was not typical. Something must have happened to him. Then the telephone rang.

Hazel answered and it might as well have been a conference call. Spicer's resonant voice crackled through the earphone.

"Hazel, love, now pay attention. Don't try to talk, I haven't much time."

"Yes, Daddy."

"I'm in a little trouble here. I'm with some people I owe some money to and they aren't going to let me go until I pay it. So what you must do is open the cabinet beside my bed and take the envelope that has \$10,000 marked on it and bring it here to 1740 Marchetti Street, that's in Montreal North. Have you got that?"

Hazel was scribbling on a pad. "I've got it. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right now. But hurry with the money."

When Hazel put down the phone, she said, "I'm afraid I'll have to go now."

"I heard," Kelly said. "It sounds like your father is being shaken down."

Hazel spent a few seconds emptying an ashtray and when she looked up, her face was hard. "A woman came here a few weeks ago and made a scene. I hated the way she looked."

"Then don't pay her. Sam and I will come with you. We'll find a way to get your father out of this."

Hazel had to be persuaded, but there was a spark in her eye when she finally went to comb her hair. When the door closed behind her,

Sam said,

"Are you crazy? There was the money in our laps. We could go out of here with her and the cash, take it from her in the street, and be gone."

"And leave her holding the bag while her father gets clobbered. I'm not interested in that."

They drove in a taxi along miles of streets lined with second-class dwellings, penetrating deeply into Montreal North. During the trip, Kelly frowned out the window, seeing nothing but the problem. As they turned onto Marchetti Street and he determined that the house was a block ahead, he told the driver to stop and wait.

"Sam, come with me," he said. "Hazel, you wait here. We'll be back soon with your father."

They approached the house, a squat, stucco bungalow that reminded Kelly of a Maginot Line gun emplacement. Sammy said, "I hope you aren't expecting me to use any muscle. That isn't my style. And you're still operating on an arm and a little bit."

"Have no fear, keep your eyes open, and follow my cues. This will be a symphony of suggestion and persuasion."

Kelly rang the bell and when he asked for Otto Noble he was led into the living room by a spectacular ash blonde with a voluptuous figure. She looked like the girl who used to stand at the side of the vaudeville stage and draw applause while a surprised Professor Lamberti took encore after encore on the xylophone. But right now her face was puzzled.

Spicer/Noble was seated deep in an upholstered chair while a middle-aged man built for shifting beer kegs held a protective pose behind him. There were no weapons in sight unless you counted the kegman's huge hands.

Kelly used his momentum. "I'm Chief Inspector Kelly of Internal Revenue." He took out his wallet and flashed a card in a plastic sleeve. It had a small picture of his face on it and looked official. "Are you Otto G. Noble of 911 Sherbrooke Street West?"

"Yes." Spicer recognized them from the hotel in Baytown but he had the presence of mind to let the scene play itself.

Kelly turned to Sam. "Be very careful now. Is this the man you know as Raphael Spicer?"

Sam said, "This is Raphael Spicer."



"The Raphael Spicer to whom your firm has paid cash sums in excess of one hundred thousand dollars over the past three years?"

"That is correct."

Kelly turned back to Spicer. "Mr. Noble, you are not under arrest at this moment so I won't read you your rights. However, I could make a call on my car telephone and have the Royal Canadian Mounted Police here within the half hour. My advice to you is to come along quietly to my office and make a statement. Your tax returns for the past five years are under serious question. But if you cooperate now, we'll try to make it as easy as possible."

Spicer got to his feet with a dramatic sigh. He threw his hands in the air and let them fall against his heavy sides. "You see how it is," he said.

His captors watched him go in bemused silence. They *thought* they saw how it was but they were not sure.

Back at the flat on Sherbrooke Street, Hazel rushed around making drinks for everybody, staring with admiring eyes at Marvin Kelly as though the sun had just risen from the top of his head. Spicer, meanwhile, was on his guard. He knew these small-town pirates had not journeyed all the way to Montreal just to rescue him. "How did you find me?" he asked.

Sam told about the credit card and then turned to Kelly. "Speaking of cards," he said, "what was that thing you flashed at the income tax inspector?"

"My membership card for the Baytown Public Library," Kelly said. "Araby had them made up at great civic expense."

The conversation rebounded aimlessly for a few more minutes and then Spicer sent his daughter to the lobby to buy some cigars. When she was gone, he said, "What about it, boys? What are you here for?"

Kelly gave it to him straight. "For \$10,000. Half of what you took from Mr. Danforth."

"You must be mad. Why should I give you all that money?"

"Because we'll call the police if you don't."

"No, you won't. Danforth wouldn't be such a fool. If he makes a noise about that cash, internal revenue will come sniffing." Spicer beamed. "I only con people who are crooked themselves. They can't afford to squeal."

Kelly said, "What makes you think we're doing this for Danforth? This is for us. We don't care if the cops put you *and* him away forever."

"You'd better believe him," Sammy said. He was hearing the argument for the first time and he loved it. The worm Kelly had turned at last.

There was a faint tone of grudging admiration in Spicer's voice as he said, "I might have known you boys were not motivated by a benevolent wish to set the world right. Your actions bear the stamp of good old free enterprise." Then he got the ten thousand from his bedside cabinet and gave it to Marvin Kelly.

The Baytown visitors were on their way to the elevator when they met Hazel in the corridor. Besides the cigars, her arms were loaded with chocolates, pretzels, peanuts, and tonic water. Her pretty face sagged a little. "Are you going?"

"Business all done," Kelly said.

"But I thought we'd have a party. Because you saved Daddy." There was a difficult question in her eyes for Kelly, one he did not feel up to answering.

They got their satchels from the "Y" and walked the short distance to Central Station. In the vaulted concourse, sparsely populated now, they sat on a wooden bench and gazed at the alien French signs.

"The best thing," Sam said finally, "is for you to hand me my five thousand now. Save you carrying all that money."

Kelly gave him a haughty glance. "You've missed the point," he said. "This money is going back to Mr. Danforth. It's the least I can do."

"For him? What about us? When do we get paid?"

"Never. Not with the wages of sin."

Sam's face darkened to reveal the suggestion of Indian ancestry that tended to emerge when he was under pressure. "You really are crazy. We've got \$10,000 cash on us and nobody knows except that crook back there. And you're going to give it to Danforth who shouldn't have had it in the first place."

"Yes, it's all wrong, isn't it?" Kelly agreed. "But if we add another wrong, it won't make it right."

"You Sunday School creep," Sam spluttered. "You soft-headed, sentimental desk clerk. That's all you'll ever be, a low-paid, blank-eyed handshaker, while Danforth makes all the money and has the fun." He

got up and stood over his partner. "I'm going to take that envelope from you, damn it. And I'm the guy who can do it."

"Go ahead and try," Kelly said. "But I'm warning you—my dead arm has come back to life." If only it were true.

They boarded the train sullen and silent. They dozed the hours away and arrived in Baytown exhausted. As luck would have it, a Baytown constable was wheeling past on his bicycle as they stood outside waiting for a taxi. The sight of him was the stimulus Sam needed.

He said, "Maybe you love Danforth or you feel guilty over Spicer getting into his suite, but I don't. And I am going to hail that cop and tell him the whole story unless you give me a thousand. I need it and I want it. Give Danforth back nine."

Kelly stared at Sam balefully in the pale green light of the street-lamp. Then, as the constable creaked up Station Hill past the canning factory, he took out the envelope and counted off ten hundred-dollar bills. It wasn't true what he had told Sam about his arm; his fingers were so numb he almost dropped the money.

A taxi pulled up and Sam got in, leaving the back door open. Kelly stood by his satchel. "Come on," Sam called, "jump in, I'll treat you to a ride home." His foxy eyes grinned from the dark interior of the car.

"No thanks," Kelly said. "I prefer to wait for the next cab."

Mr. Danforth was surprised to see the money. He stood in the back office the next afternoon and listened to Marvin's story of Montreal, minus the reference to Sam's avarice. "I appreciate all the trouble you went to," he said at the end, "but you may have done a dangerous thing." He looked at the cash on his desk as if it was counters in a game. "If Spicer is upset enough, he could make a noise with internal revenue. Or maybe he has friends. We may not have heard the end of this."

Kelly was flabbergasted. Strung out from the tension of the encounters with Spicer and his adversaries, and depressed by his breakup with Sam, he had at least expected appreciation from Mr. Danforth.

"What the hell is this?" he said, his voice shrill with exasperation. "I accept that we're living in a jungle. But a tiger comes by and rips you and you don't even dare cry out for fear he'll come back and finish the job! I could weep."

Mrs. Danforth moved aside from the doorway to let Kelly leave the

office and as he brushed past her she looked at him with knowing eyes.

That Saturday night, he took Araby dancing at the Park Pavilion. During the intermission, they carried soft drinks outside and went to sit in the dark in the grandstand, staring before the sun went down at what had once been a baseball infield. They were surrounded by lovers, about the same size crowd that might attend a league game between Baytown and Napanee. Kelly put his arm along the back of the bench and she lay her head on his shoulder and after a while she said, "You've been quiet for a few days."

"Thinking of my life," he said. "Thinking of quitting this job and running off to Montreal and working in some gritty hotel and doing all kinds of irrational, middle-aged things."

"And is that what you're going to do?"

"Yes."

"And what's to become of me?"

"You're coming along."

They got married within a few days, in a ceremony so small it was almost invisible. Then Kelly took on the problem of arranging his job in Montreal. Working through a friendly commercial traveler who had a contact, this took a few weeks. When it was settled, he was free to walk over to the police station and talk to Sergeant Don Cleary.

He told about Spicer's robbery, the undeclared income in Danforth's safe, his refusal to prosecute, the expedition to recapture the stolen funds—a rundown on the whole den of thieves. Don Cleary was a bulldog. Now that his teeth were fastened on the matter, he would not let go without prosecutions.

A week later, on Kelly's last day behind the desk, Danforth called him into the back office for a final word. "You made a lot of waves, Marvin," he said. "My feet are getting wet. Why did you do it?"

Kelly wondered why, then he said, "I guess it's because I had a dead arm back there for a while. No sensation in it at all. I'm treating it like a warning."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That the rest of me could be like that soon enough." Kelly smiled; yes, that was it. "So as long as I'm getting feelings, I'd better do what they say."

*There is danger in the invisible. . .*



# NIGHT- WALKER

by **ROBERT J.  
RANDISI**

**H**e sits at the dimly lit bar and listens to the conversations going on around him. He does not concentrate on any one conversation, but strains to catch at least a piece of each separate one within earshot. With a wave of his hand he orders a second drink and continues to listen. He is listening for a certain phrase to be spoken, at which time he will make his plans and act upon them.

The words, however, when spoken, do not come from any of the

conversations going on around him, but from the bartender as he brings him his third drink.

"So, what do you think?" the bartender asks.

Glancing at the heavily built man behind the bar, he asks, "About what?"

Pointing to the far end of the bar the bartender says, "We was having an argument, about Ali and this new guy. I think the challenger is gonna get hurt pretty good, but those guys figure Ali is taking the guy too light. Me, I know Ali can beat a nobody like this bum. I mean, who is he, you know? He's nobody!"

He stares at the overweight bartender for a few moments before telling the man, "Go back to your friends."

Frowning, the bartender starts to say something else, but thinks better of it and moves off. . .

Finishing his drink, he rises to leave, stopping only to ask the hatcheck girl, "What time does the bartender work until?"

"Midnight," she answers and, batting heavily made-up eyes at him, adds, "Why? Won't I do?"

Without answering, he leaves the bar and picks a spot outside.

The bartender leaves at five minutes past midnight. He turns right and proceeds towards an alley. As he passes the alley he is grabbed by the neck from behind and dragged in. Although the attacker is smaller and thinner, his strength is sufficient to hold the bigger man until he chooses to release him, deeper into the alley. There he pushes the bartender against the building.

"What do you want?" the heavier man cries, eyes wide with fright. "I ain't got no money! What do you want?"

Slowly the smaller man takes a switchblade from his pocket and allows the four-and-a-half-inch blade to spring free from the six-inch handle. Although at its widest the blade is a mere three-eighths of an inch it is a very effective weapon.

Rotating the knife slowly, he catches the frightened man's eyes with his own, then he plunges it swiftly into his belly. The man screams. He falls to the ground whimpering. The last words he hears before dying are "Everybody is somebody."

He rides the subway, listening to the conversations. Not to any one conversation, but to at least a part of every one he can.

He listens for a certain phrase.

From behind him he hears, "I wouldn't go out with Arnold on a bet. He's so short—a little fat nobody."

He turns to see who is speaking. The girl is young, not yet twenty, with blonde hair and smooth skin. He watches closely to see where she gets off, and follows when she does.

It is late and he and the girl are the only two to leave the train. The girl gives him a brief and suspicious look, satisfying herself as to who got off with her and what he looks like. Apparently what she sees does not frighten her and she begins to walk towards the stairway to the street. He notices that there is no clerk in the change booth. He follows the girl closely and calls to her as she approaches the stairs. She turns, but does not see the blade in his hand. She does see his intense eyes when they catch hers and hold them.

"What it is? What do you—" she begins, her voice tinged now with fear. He steps in and, in one swift motion, plunges the thin blade into the girl. She falls to the floor clutching herself. The last words she hears before dying are, "Everybody is somebody."

It is almost morning, almost daylight. He cannot function correctly in daylight. Somehow the sunlight inhibits him, makes him a different person. At night it's different. In the daytime, as a janitor in a high school, he is a nobody. He cleans floors, walls, the yard and locker rooms, the lunch room—everyone believing that, as a janitor, he is subject to their commands.

"Clean that up, Woodley."

"I dropped some milk, Woodley, mop it up, would you, please?"

"Who's that? Oh, just Woodley."

In the daytime he is Woodley the nobody.

But everybody is somebody, so at night when darkness falls, he is somebody.

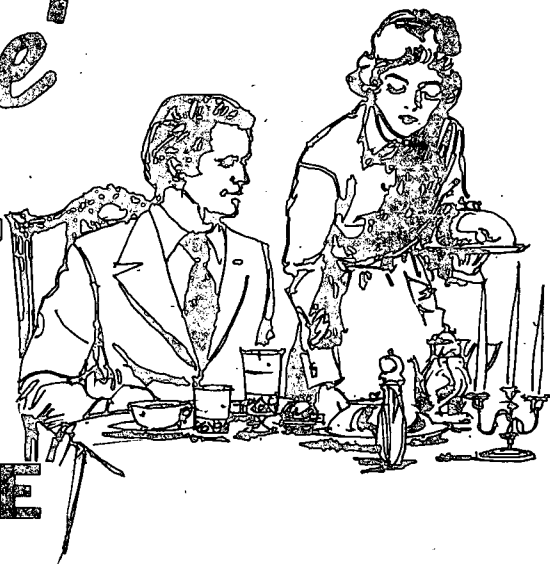


*What was his motive then? What was his motive now? . . .*



# My Compliments To the Cook

by  
**JACK  
RITCHIE**



I served twelve years and eight months, which is the minimum for parole in this state when one is sentenced to life imprisonment for murder.

When I reached the city, I took a cab to my late Uncle Horatio's residence, now owned and occupied by my cousin Randolph. The taxi turned into the grounds at the gateposts, followed the winding driveway, and stopped at the circle before the big house.



I paid the driver, picked up my zipper bag, and went up the wide stairs to the front door.

A uniformed maid answered my ring. "Yes, sir?"

"I would like to see Randolph Hobart."

"I'm sorry, sir, but he isn't expected home until five."

I nodded. "I will wait for Randolph in the study. I know where it is."

She hesitated a moment before allowing me to enter.

I left her and made my way to the rear of the first floor.

Yes, basically, the study was just about as it had been thirteen years ago. New blinds, perhaps, and, of course, the rug had been replaced. After all, it had been quite messy the last time I saw it. But otherwise the room remained remarkably the same. I pulled open the middle drawer of the big desk, half expecting to find Uncle Horatio's revolver, but it was not there now.

I turned and found an attractive woman studying me. She appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties, with dark hair and cautious eyes.

She would be Randolph's wife, the former Irene Carrolton, and he had married her four years ago. I wondered if cousin Randolph would ever have met her, much less married her, if it hadn't been for the good fortune of Uncle Horatio's death.

"I am Mrs. Hobart," she said. "May I help you?"

I smiled. "My name is James Hobart. Perhaps Randolph has mentioned me now and then?"

She gave that a few seconds' thought. "James Hobart? You wouldn't be the one who. . . ?"

I nodded. "The one who is supposed to have murdered Uncle Horatio? Yes, I am."

Her eyes went to the phone.

I retained my smile. "I have not escaped from prison. I'm on parole. I am here merely to renew old family ties, so to speak. After all, Randolph is still my cousin."

She relaxed slightly. "Actually, Randolph has said almost nothing about you at all beyond the fact that you murdered Uncle Horatio." She moved to the liquor cabinet. "Would you care for a drink?"

When she handed me my brandy, I settled into a chair. "Would you be interested in hearing my version of the murder?"

"By all means."

I sipped my drink. "It was a warm summer evening. Quite warm, but it rained heavily at ten, cooling things off to some degree, and I stood at my open bedroom window enjoying the new breeze.

"From where I stood I had a clear view across the patio to the windows of this study and I was startled to see Uncle Horatio, revolver in hand, confronting a man wearing a black mask.

"Naturally I ran down the stairs to the first floor and across the patio to join Uncle Horatio. But when I reached the study, I found Uncle Horatio and the masked man struggling for the gun. There was a shot. Uncle Horatio fell and the masked man brushed past me, making for the open French windows. I saw immediately that Uncle Horatio was beyond help—he had been shot cleanly through the heart.

"The gun for which they had been struggling lay beside him. Instinctively I picked it up and ran after the intruder. I pursued him around the corner of the house, emptying the entire revolver in his direction, but evidently I missed him. He disappeared from my sight into the wooded part of the grounds. I continued searching for him, however, until I heard the sound of police sirens coming up the driveway. When I returned to the house, I found the police, Randolph, Anthony, and the servants milling about."

She had been studying me. "Anthony? Oh, yes. Randolph's brother. I never met him. He died in a sports car accident some six years ago. I understand that both Anthony *and* Randolph accused you of shooting Uncle Horatio. They said that they had actually seen you do it."

I nodded.

"They were liars, of course. Anthony maintained somewhat hysterically that it was *he* who had been standing at *his* bedroom window—his room was next to mine—and his attention had been drawn to the study windows where he saw me and Uncle Horatio apparently in an argument. He said that he saw me pull a gun from Uncle Horatio's desk drawer, shoot him, and then rush out into the night firing wildly and shouting to some imaginary person to halt."

"And you still claim that the person you chased was not at all imaginary?"

"He was quite real, I assure you. But Randolph backed up his brother completely. He said he had been taking a walk on the grounds to cool off and was in the vicinity of the tennis courts when he looked

back toward the house. He said that he saw exactly what his brother had seen. To the last detail."

"What motive could they possibly have had for lying?"

"The three of us—Randolph, Anthony, and I—were equal beneficiaries in Uncle Horatio's will and we all knew it. Thirteen years ago, his estate was worth in the neighborhood of three million dollars. I, however, as his convicted murderer, was not allowed to profit by my crime. Therefore Randolph and Anthony split the estate between them. Each got one and a half million dollars."

"And you think that they framed you just so that they would each get an extra half million dollars instead of just one paltry million?" She shook her head. "I suppose it's a motive of sorts, but somehow I feel that they would have been quite satisfied with just one million each rather than going through the risk of trying to frame a cousin just to pick up another half million. They didn't hate you or anything like that, did they?"

"No. On the contrary, we got along rather well."

"There," she said. "Besides, Randolph is quite a moral man. I don't think his conscience could possibly allow him to lie about something as serious as murder."

"Yes," I said. "Randolph was quite a moral man. Did you know that thirteen years ago he entertained the thought of entering the ministry? That was, of course, before he acquired his share—and more—of Uncle Horatio's estate. Evidently having money made him change his mind."

I studied her as she had studied me. Yes, she was quite an attractive woman. Probably the joy of Randolph's life.

She finished her drink. "Are you positive that you are not here for some sort of revenge?"

I smiled. "Revenge? The thought never entered my mind."

Did she find it a bit boring here? I wondered. Would she like to have life just a touch more interesting? Possibly some challenge? Some temptation?

She cocked her head slightly. "How old were you when you went to prison?"

"I had just turned twenty-one. If only Uncle Horatio had been murdered a month earlier, I would have been tried as a juvenile. In those days you legally became an adult only at twenty-one. Who knows how much lighter my sentence might have been?"

Irene did some mental addition. "Twenty-one? That would make you thirty-three today?"

I nodded. "People have always seen me as older than my years. Possibly because I appear to be a bit formal—stuffy, if you like." I smiled again. "But I am not really stuffy, once you get to know me."

Randolph appeared at the study door. He did not seem surprised to see me and so I supposed that the maid had informed him of my presence.

"Good evening, James," he said. "How are you?"

"In quite good health, Randolph."

There were a few moments of silence and then Irene said brightly, "James, you *must* stay for dinner. I believe we're having *Daube de Boeuf Provençale*."

"Ah," I said, "I have been dreaming about that for years."

She met my eyes momentarily. "And you simply must stay at least the night."

"Thank you," I said. "Perhaps I could have my old room? Randolph knows which one it is."

Randolph seemed to sigh. "Of course, James. You're welcome to stay here for . . . for as long as it takes you to adjust to the outside world again."

At dinner that evening, I smiled. "You know, Randolph, the thought just occurred to me that if I hadn't killed Uncle Horatio, today he would be alive and well. And you and I would very likely be junior vice-presidents, or something like that, in his firm and on strained salaries. Uncle Horatio was not exactly generous to a fault."

I helped myself to cucumbers in cream, one of my favorite vegetable dishes. "It makes one think, doesn't it?"

Randolph cleared his throat. "I do hope that your time in prison wasn't too difficult."

"Not at all, Randolph. I adjusted splendidly, knowing that if I behaved, I would almost certainly be out in twelve years and eight months—a bright beacon ahead. I spent twelve of those years behind bars working in the prison library—the last six as Chief Inmate Librarian." I savored the asparagus in plain butter. "Did you know that in twelve years and eight months, we were never served asparagus?"

Irene spoke to me. "The three of you—Randolph, Anthony, and you—lived in this house thirteen years ago?"

"Yes. We were what might be called apprentices to Uncle Horatio. He made his millions as a plumbing contractor and he was initiating us into the business."

Later in the evening, Randolph and I moved alone to the study.

He shifted a bit. "James, have you come here for some *particular* reason?"

I selected a cigar from the humidor. "Randolph, do you remember my description of the intruder I claimed killed Uncle Horatio?"

"You mentioned that he wore a mask."

"Yes, a mask. But besides that I also described him as being approximately my size and weight."

"I suppose you did. I don't really remember."

"Randolph, during the course of your life, you must have noticed that all three of us—you, and Anthony, and I—were the same height and weight?"

"What are you getting at, James?"

I lit the cigar. "Thirteen years ago, you claimed that you had been at the tennis courts when you looked back toward the house and saw me shoot Uncle Horatio. You said you saw me rush out of the study, chasing an imaginary intruder around the corner of the house and firing the revolver into the air. You also said you immediately rushed across the grounds to the scene of the murder."

His chin became a bit stubborn. "Yes."

"Randolph, there is no path leading directly from the tennis courts to the house. Did you run across the lawn?"

"Yes," he said quickly. "That's what I did."

"But Randolph, it had been raining that night and the grass was still wet—and rather high. Your shoes, not to mention the bottoms of your trouser legs, should have been thoroughly saturated with water. But I remember distinctly that they were dry. Dry, Randolph, *dry*."

His eyes clouded for a moment of reflection, but he said nothing.

I sighed. "Unfortunately for me, the significance of that entirely escaped me at the time. But lying in my cell year after year and going over what happened again and again, the importance of the dry shoes and trousers finally struck me. You lied to the police, Randolph. You did not witness the murder at all. You were not at the tennis courts."

He flushed. "When the so-called significance of all this struck you, why didn't you tell it to the authorities?"

I shook my head. "Come now, Randolph. Five years after the murder could I really go to the police and say, 'I'm sorry, but just at this moment I suddenly remembered that my cousin's shoes and trouser bottoms were dry when they should have been wet.' What corroboration would I have? Would anyone else at the scene have noticed, much less remembered, the condition of your shoes and trousers?"

He regarded me carefully. "In other words, you have absolutely no real proof that I was lying?"

"Absolutely none, Randolph. You got away with it completely."

He flushed a bit.

I let a few moments pass.

"Why did you lie, Randolph? Was it because that was really *you* underneath that mask?"

He sputtered. "That is absolutely ridiculous."

I watched him. "But then why did you lie, Randolph?"

He avoided my eyes.

I took a slow puff on my cigar. "Perhaps I can help you, Randolph. We both know what Anthony was like. Spoiled, unstable, a compulsive gambler. He was deeply in debt and he was being pressed by his creditors. I know because he came to me and asked for a loan of \$10,000, but, of course, I had no money to give him. I imagine that you didn't either. Then, in desperation, did he approach Uncle Horatio? And certainly Uncle Horatio must have turned him down. Did he, perhaps, even threaten to cut Anthony out of his will entirely for incurring such a large gambling debt?"

Randolph did not meet my eyes.

I put down my cigar. "It was *Anthony* behind that mask. When I pursued him, he lost me and doubled back to the house. Perhaps he thought that I might have somehow discovered that it was him under the mask and decided that attack was the best defense. He got to the police first with a story about seeing *me* murder Uncle Horatio, hoping that it would blunt any accusation I might make."

Randolph glared at me. "What makes you so certain that it was Anthony behind the mask?"

"Anthony claimed that he witnessed the murder from his bedroom window and then rushed downstairs, across the patio, to the study. The patio is tiled and well-drained. And yet Anthony's shoes and the bottoms of his trousers were quite wet—as wet as though he had been

running outside in the tall grass."

Randolph turned away.

I sighed. "Randolph, I don't believe for one moment that you deliberately tried to frame me. I'm certain that you would have preferred to blame some stranger, some intruder, for the murder, but your brother had already committed himself with his story to the police. You may have had some doubts about what he said because you knew how desperately he needed money. You also realized that if the police ever began to doubt his story, they would investigate further. They might even test his hands for gunpowder grains. You wanted to protect Anthony, because he was, after all, your brother, and you felt that the best way to do that was to quickly corroborate whatever he said and hope that it was really true."

Randolph moved to the window and stared out. "Mind you, I am admitting nothing. I believe that Anthony must have seen you murder Uncle Horatio. Or perhaps he saw someone who *looked* like you. Yes, that was possibly it." He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "It is just remotely possible that Anthony did make a mistake. In which case you might really be . . ."

He put the handkerchief away. "Actually, I've always been rather fond of you, James. Respected you, and all that, and I found it hard to believe that you would murder anyone for money. I mean that it never seemed to mean that much to you. However, when Anthony said that . . ."

He squared his shoulders. "Frankly, I've been thinking over my part in all of this and . . . Well, there is no way to give you back thirteen years. However . . ." He turned to face me. "Anthony ran through every cent he inherited. He was broke when he died in that auto accident." He cleared his throat. "However, I have done fairly well. Fairly. Your rightful share of Uncle Horatio's estate would have been one million dollars. Would it help to ease the years of . . . I mean would it settle accounts—for both Anthony and me—if I arranged for the transfer of one million dollars to your account?"

I smiled.

"Randolph, you are more than generous."

The fact is, of course, that I did indeed murder Uncle Horatio and the event occurred just as Anthony had described it.

Uncle Horatio and I had had a violent quarrel—the subject being Winifred, the downstairs maid. She was a quiet girl who had attracted me and I had decided to ask her to marry me.

When I informed Uncle Horatio of my plans, he coldly informed me that the marriage was impossible—I was marrying below my station in life.

I reminded him that I had no station, and besides, since when had plumbing contractors been elevated to the peerage? At which point, he informed me that he was cutting me out of his will.

When I informed him, quite graphically, what he could do with his money, he turned vicious, saying things about Winifred which I could not possibly allow.

I was young then. Just past twenty-one. I lost my head completely, pulled the revolver from the desk drawer, and shot Uncle Horatio dead.

The shock of the murder immediately brought me back to my senses, and, among other things, I discovered that I was not at all eager to go to prison for his death.

My first thought was of simply fleeing the room and hoping that some intruder—some burglar—would be blamed for Uncle Horatio's death.

But then I realized that the police would most surely have their suspicions. They would make tests to determine if anyone in the household had gunpowder grains on his hands.

How could I explain those on mine? Even if I had the time to wash my hands, I had read that removing all traces of gunpowder is nearly impossible.

If I had had more time to think, I might have come up with something better, but I felt certain that the shot had been heard and I was forced into immediate action. I was left with no alternative but pretending to chase the supposed murderer and firing the gun into the air. That, at least, would be one way of explaining the powder grains on my hands.

I did not know at the time that Anthony had witnessed the entire incident from his bedroom window. And, of course, I had no reason to disbelieve Randolph when he said that he had also seen the crime being committed from the tennis courts.

So I went to prison resigned to my fate. I allowed the world to be-



lieve that I had killed Uncle Horatio for his money. There seemed to be no point in dragging Winifred into the mess.

As for the condition of anyone's shoes or trousers, I haven't the faintest recollection to this day whether they were wet or dry.

What did eventually occupy my thoughts, however, was the coincidence of having two people at two different points witnessing the murder, and the further coincidence that they just happened to be brothers.

I pondered upon that at some length. Was it at all possible that one of them had lied about actually seeing the murder committed?

And *if* one of them had lied, *why* had he lied?

Was it because he wanted to make certain that I would be out of the way so that he could split my share of Uncle Horatio's estate with his brother? Frankly, I found it hard to believe that either Anthony or Randolph would stoop to something like that.

I turned to another possibility.

Granting that Anthony had seen the crime committed, he had then blurted his story to the police. Randolph had believed him, of course, and yet, at the time, Anthony had been a bit hysterical. If the police questioned him further, would Anthony go to pieces?

What harm would it do if Randolph simply bolstered his brother's story by declaring that he too had witnessed the crime? After all, he *did* believe that his brother had seen me commit the murder, and why should Anthony be subjected to an ordeal by the police? It might only lead to a breakdown of sorts. After all, Anthony wasn't really too stable as it was.

And yet, as the years passed, did some small doubt begin to gnaw at Randolph? Did he possibly approach Anthony with his doubts? And had Anthony so vehemently declared that he had indeed seen me commit the crime that it had only served the opposite purpose of reinforcing Randolph's doubts?

And did this uncertainty bother him enough so that I could touch him for a ten- or twenty-thousand-dollar rehabilitation loan when I got out of prison?

It seemed worth a try and I had hit the jackpot.

When I left Randolph in the study, I took a bottle of brandy and two glasses up to my room.

I waited and at ten o'clock there was a knock at my door.

It was Winifred.

She had been the downstairs maid at the time of the murder and today she was the cook. While I had been in prison, she had seen me every visitor's day for nearly thirteen years.

She had been eighteen then. She was thirty-one now and the only woman I had ever loved or ever would.

She smiled. "How did everything go?"

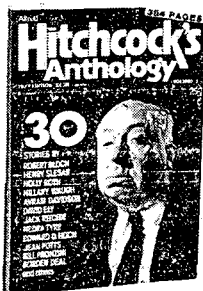
"Better than my wildest expectations."

It had been a long, long time since I had been alone with Winifred.

I locked the door.

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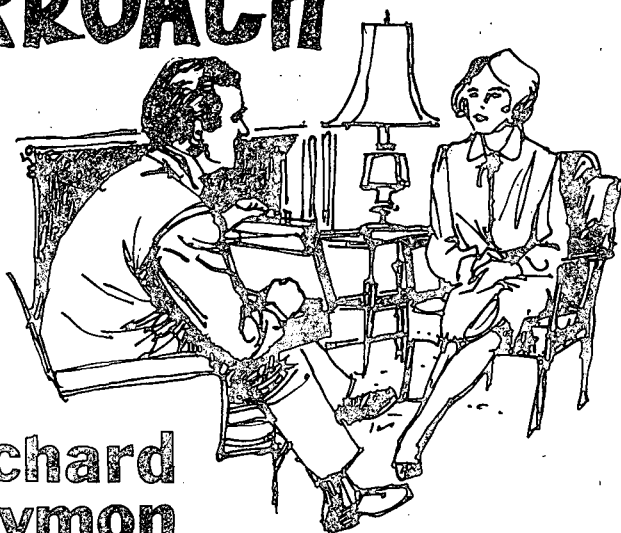
AHMM177

*There are dangers in buying, dangers in selling . . .*

# THE DIRECT APPROACH

by

**Richard  
Laymon**



“I was about to leave.”

“I’ll only take a few minutes of your time, Mrs. Morton.”

“Miss,” she corrected. “It’s Miss.”

“Miss Morton.”

“You got my name from the mailbox, right?”

“That’s very astute, Miss Morton, very astute. If I might have a few moments of your time?”

"I really should be leaving." She started to shut the door, but the man's black case blocked it. "Will you please remove your sample case?"

"Miss Morton, I'm offering you the opportunity of a lifetime."

"What are you selling?"

"If I might just step inside for a moment?"

"I really don't think I'd be interested, Mr. . . ."

"Snye. Marvin Snye. It'll be worth a great deal to you."

"Just what *are* you selling?"

He smiled. His mouth was too red, his teeth too white. "Miss Morton, I'm in the mortality business."

"Cemetery plots?"

"No, no. Hardly that. The firm I represent deals in discreet homicide.

Peggy Morton's heart raced.

"Murder?"

"Precisely."

"You're kidding me."

"I'm quite serious, Miss Morton."

Shutting her eyes, she rubbed her temples. "I . . . I don't know. Murder? O.K., let's hear what you've got to say." She opened the door wide. "Come in."

Marvin Snye stepped into her house. He looked slight in his grey suit. His hair was as black as shoe polish, and his face looked white except for the slash of his mouth. He sat on the couch. Peggy hoped he wouldn't lean back; his hair, she was certain, would leave a dark smudge on the upholstery.

"You may be wondering, Miss Morton, about the exact nature of the service I'm making available to you."

"You might say that." She smiled nervously, and sat on a chair facing him.

"I represent the firm Futures Unlimited. We believe that the future lies in the hands of the strong, Miss Morton, in the hands of those individuals with the courage to make it theirs. If you're that kind of person—and I think you are—then you'll find our service perfectly suited to your special needs."

She cleared her throat. "What do you do, exactly?"

"I'm glad you asked that question. It shows you're a woman who

likes the direct approach, and so do I. You believe in confronting situations head-on, don't you?"

"Usually, yes."

He smoothed his hair, then glanced at his hand as if to see whether anything had rubbed off. "Our firm believes," he explained, "that situations arise from time to time that cannot be solved by conventional means. For a modest sum, we remove those obstacles, those irritants, often with astounding results. If I may?"

He lifted the black case onto his lap, opened it, and took out a leaflet.

"Allow me to read you comments by a few of our satisfied customers." From the back of the leaflet, he read, "'When I was recently passed over for a promotion, I was truly despondent. Futures Unlimited changed all that. I am now vice-president of a major manufacturing company, and have a brilliant career in front of me. My gratitude goes to you.'

"And here's another. I'm sure you'll appreciate this one. 'The old goat simply wouldn't pass on. I thought he'd live forever, and I was penniless. You did good. You're worth every penny.' We get all kinds, don't we, Miss Morton?" He grinned, and chuckled softly.

"One more? 'My husband was a drunken brute. Futures Unlimited worked wonders for my peace of mind.' I think that speaks for itself, doesn't it? I have many others in a similar vein, but these ought to be sufficient to indicate the positive response of our customers.

"Now, Miss Morton, tell me this: is there someone in either your personal or professional life whom you feel to be an obstacle, a nuisance, a threat?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, there sure is."

"Wonderful. I'm sure you'll be totally satisfied with our handling of the matter."

"What will it cost?"

"Five thousand dollars. Twenty-five hundred in advance, the rest to be paid in full upon completion of the task."

"That's an awful lot, isn't it?"

"We *do* offer a five percent discount if you agree to provide a testimonial for advertising purposes. An additional fifteen percent discount is available if you purchase two disposals. That would mean, in effect, that you could purchase each for a mere \$4,000."

"I'd only want one."

"With the testimonial?"

"I guess that would be O.K."

"It would come to \$4,750."

"That's still awfully high."

"Frankly, I'm disappointed to hear you say that, Miss Morton." He shook his head with regret.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"If you shop around, you'll find that our fees are entirely reasonable. Certainly, you *could* have the job done for less, but you would invariably be dealing with amateurish thugs. Highly dangerous. In matters as sensitive as this, you would be unwise to settle for anything less than the best. And we, at Futures Unlimited, *are* the best. We offer you complete confidentiality and prompt, efficient service of the highest professional quality. Naturally, the best costs a little more."

"Naturally."

"Now, shall we get down to basics?" He took a gold-plated pen from his shirt pocket, and a note pad from his suit coat. "Your name?"

"Margaret Morton."

"Address including zip code?"

She gave it to him. He scribbled in the notebook, never looking up.

"Occupation?"

"Police officer."

The pen stopped. His lips formed a sickly smile. "You are joking, of course?"

"Of course."

"I'm certain you realize, if you are a police officer, that a charge of conspiracy to commit murder requires an overt act?"

"I'm not a cop."

"All we have done so far is—fantasize." He cleared his throat. "Occupation?"

"Salesperson."

"Employer?"

"Western Cosmetics."

"Annual income?"

"Is that necessary?"

"I'm afraid so. We need to . . ."

"Eighteen thousand."

"Very good, Miss Morton. Now, I'll need the name of the subject."

"Steve Hayes. H-A-Y-E-S."

"Address?"

"This address."

"Oh?"

"Yes, he lives here."

"When can he be found at this location?"

"Every evening. He gets home from work at a quarter past five, and leaves at ten after seven in the morning."

"Weekends off?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Now, Miss Morton, what would you like me to put down as your motive?"

"What?"

"Your motive. Your reason for wanting Futures Unlimited to remove this man from your life."

"He's been stepping out on me," she muttered.

Marvin Snye shook his head. "If I may say so, Miss Morton, it's difficult to believe that a man could find any woman more beautiful and seductive than you."

"Thank you." She squirmed under the man's watery gaze. "You want a snapshot of him or something?"

"That would be very helpful."

"Just a moment." Peggy went to the front door where she'd left her purse. She removed her billfold, opened it, and took out a color photo. "Here's one," she said. She brought it to the couch, and handed it to him.

"Very good. Excellent. This will be of considerable help. Now, if you'll just sign here?" He held out his pen.

Peggy took it. "What's this you want me to sign?"

"Your agreement to write a testimonial at the completion of our task. It will mean a savings to you of \$250."

"O.K." She scanned the document. "I'll bet you get a lot of business."

"We do quite well." He smiled with pride. "I've just been transferred from back east to handle this region, and I certainly find my hands full."

"I guess there're lots of people around who want somebody dead."

"Almost everyone. Of course, many can't pay the price we ask and others haven't the moral courage to deal with us. Still, I've managed to sign up half a dozen prospects within the past week." He fondly patted his notebook. "Now, if you'll sign right there?"

She signed.

"When will you have the cash available for pickup?"

She grinned down at him, and said, "Never."

"Miss Morton, really, I fail to . . ."

"I won't pay you a single cent. How do you like that, trooper?"

"I fail to see . . ."

He tried to duck away as Peggy thrust the pen toward his throat, but he wasn't quick enough.

"Amateurish thug, huh?"

She looked at the blood spilling onto her couch and groaned. Cut-throat competition could get so messy.

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*He couldn't say she hadn't warned him . . .*

# THE ACCOUNTANT'S WIFE



Ed Roberts didn't read the ransom note until six o'clock that Sunday night. He'd already asked Vicki where her mother was; she said she didn't know, maybe still over at that Mrs. Webb's where she stayed Saturday night. Then Rich showed off his catch. Vicki sneered and held her nose. Ed suggested putting the fish in the freezer and asked Rich to help him unload the station wagon, so it was almost six when he noticed the legal-sized envelope on the hall table. It was addressed, in

THE ACCOUNTANT'S WIFE

59

block letters, to Mr. Edward Roberts, with a notation below: DO NOT DESTROY. "What's this, Vicki?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "it was hanging on the gate when I got home this morning."

A strip of mastic tape still clung to a corner of the envelope, its ends which had once looped the gate pickets now crumpled and mashed. Ed hesitated for a moment, looking as if he might question Vicki further, then tore open the envelope and read the hand-printed message: "Your wife has been kidnapped. She is safe so far. You have one week to raise \$25,000 in small unmarked bills. At 11 A.M. on May 3rd a phone call will be made to your office. Do not expect to hear a voice, but as soon as you know the line is open, state whether or not you have the money. Instructions will come to you later through the mail. Follow them exactly."

Dazed, Ed looked at his children. "Your mother has been kidnapped," he announced.

Vicki's ten-year-old face found difficulty settling into a proper expression. Her lips trembled from a smile of disbelief to the droop of frightened realization while Rich's eight-year-old eyes remained blankly unaccepting.

Walking stiffly, Ed moved down the hall carrying the letter and envelope with its untidy balls of tape in one hand, while the other guided his steps by pressing against the wall as if the way were dark and perilous. The children followed him to the kitchen, standing wide-eyed as he reached for the wall phone. He stared at the hand holding the ransom note as if he could not figure out how to free a finger for dialing, and solved the problem at last by dropping the letter and envelope to the tiled counter.

Fingers free, he dialed the number of the local police department while asking Vicki when she had last seen her mother. Without hearing her tear-drowned reply, he explained into the telephone mouthpiece that there had been a kidnapping . . . his wife . . . yes, he had received a note . . . His name? He searched and remembered—then searched again in order to recall his address. He hung up the phone and turned to Vicki. "Well, when?" he asked.

"When what?"

"When did you last see your mother?"

Vicki cried out, feeling guilty. She had left the house for Kim's—

Mom said she could go—at five to seven Saturday evening, and she ran all the way so she wouldn't miss a minute of Wild World of Animals on TV.

"Was that the last time you saw her?"

Yes. She was getting ready to go out and told Vicki she'd probably stay the night with Mrs. Webb.

"Who in hell is Mrs. Webb?" asked Ed.

Some woman, Vicki sobbed, and Rich chimed in. She was some woman their mother had met somewhere and drove over to see quite often, especially on those many nights Ed had to work downtown on people's income-tax reports. "If you think I sit here at home every night you work late, you'd better think again," Ed remembered in a sudden recall of a breakfast-table conversation.

What woman? persisted Ed. Who was she? Where did she live and how well did their mother know her?

The children had no answers. They had never seen Mrs. Webb. All they knew was that their mother always said she was going over to Mrs. Webb's and for them to keep the doors locked. Both were weeping now. Both were frightened.

Ed raced from the house, past his station wagon parked in the driveway, and raised the garage door. Roseanne's Nova was not there.

It was while he stood in the doorway of the garage that the unmarked car turned into his driveway, and was parked behind his station wagon. Two men in civilian clothes got out. They showed Ed their badges. He read the names, Detective Moore and Detective Donahue, and ushered them inside.

They were coolly friendly, objectively sympathetic. They read the hand-printed message with expression. They asked what time it was found. So it could have been taped there, on the gate, at any time between something after seven the night before and whenever it was found this morning . . . "Vicki?"

"I came home this morning—from Kim's, where I stayed all night—at about 10:30. I remember because Kim's mother said she had to be in Sunday School at 10:30 and she was taking Kim in the car. I walked from their house home. I saw the envelope on the gate and pulled it off the wood slats where it was stuck. It was addressed to Daddy, not with the address, it didn't have to be, it was on the gate in front of the house—"

Moore left to question the neighbors, to find out if anyone had seen or heard anything unusual during the period of time between seven the evening before and ten-thirty this morning. Donahue remained to take notes. "You were off on a fishing trip, Mr. Roberts? You and your son?"

"We left for Lake Sereno about seven Saturday morning," Ed related, remembering Vicki's whine at breakfast: "If Rich gets to sleep in a tent, I ought to get to sleep over at Kim's house," and Roseanne's reply: "Why not? Call her mother and see if it's all right." "We arrived at the lake before eleven. We broke camp about two this afternoon and got back here at five-thirty. First free weekend I've had in months. I'm a C.P.A. and up to April 15th I don't have a minute, so I take some time off and this is what happens—" He spread his hands, palms up, in a gesture of despair. "The very first weekend—"

"Then the last time you saw your wife was at seven yesterday morning?"

Ed nodded.

Donahue turned to Vicki. "And the last time you saw your mother was at seven last night?"

"Five minutes to," she corrected him.

"All right. Was she ready to go out then?"

Vicki thought about it. "I think so," she said. "Yes, I remember."

"What did she have on?"

"I think, let's see—I think it was a black pantsuit. Yes, it's new and it's got a red coat that goes with it. That was on the bed. So was the suitcase."

Ed jumped and the detective looked up from his notebook. "Suitcase?"

"Well, she said she'd probably spend the night with Mrs. Webb."

"Did she take anything with her except nightwear?"

Vicki didn't know, hadn't thought about it. Neither had Ed. He remembered now a recent breakfast-table threat: "One of these days you're liable to wake up and find me gone, bag and baggage," and his reply: "Knock it off, Roseanne." He led the way to the master bedroom and opened the closet doors. "Anything gone?" asked the detective. Ed wasn't sure. He shook his head and looked at the children. They wouldn't know. They shook their heads too.

"Now the luggage," said the detective. Ed reached up and opened

the doors above the closet upon three matched pieces of luggage, two large ones and a small overnight case. The medium-sized suitcase was gone. "Just the one gone," he said.

"This Mrs. Webb," brought up the detective, "you don't know where she lives, what her telephone number is? What she looks like? . . . Well, we'll find her somehow. Vicki, after you came home this morning and found the note—"

"I didn't read it."

"I know. Your father and brother were at the lake and your mother wasn't here. What did you do? Did you stay around or did you go somewhere?"

"Well, I picked the Sunday paper up off the lawn and got the key from Mom's hiding place at the corner of the porch and poured myself a glass of milk and put some cookies in a paper napkin and went out back on the patio where the sun was shining and read the funnies."

"There were no phone calls? You didn't see anybody?"

"No."

"Didn't you think it strange your mother didn't come home?"

"I didn't think anything about it."

"You mean this was usual?"

"Oh no, it's the first time Mom ever stayed anywhere else but home overnight. But she'd said she was going to, so I didn't think anything about it. I went back to Kim's and got home again about 5:30 and in a little while Daddy and Rich showed up."

"And all the time the note was lying on the hall table."

"I didn't know it was important—and awful!" Vicki wailed.

"About Mrs. Roberts' car," asked the detective.

Ed dropped a protective arm across his daughter's shoulders. "It's a Nova," he said, "red, '75."

"License number?" The detective's pencil was poised.

"I don't know. I don't even know my own on the station wagon."

"O.K. We can get it from the Department of Motor Vehicles."

Moore returned from his canvas of the neighborhood. He shook his head. "Nobody saw or heard anything," he announced. "All the houses are set back and fenced, rather remote. Lots of trees, shrubbery to screen the view and deaden sounds. They probably didn't see or hear anything." The two prepared to leave with a fairly clear full-length snapshot and an obviously flattering studio portrait of Roseanne

Roberts, along with the ransom note.

"What happens now?" asked Ed.

"Well, we get the license number of the Nova and send out an APB—we try to run down this Mrs. Webb—we check air flights, buses, taxis—we find out if anybody saw your wife, when and where—and we wait for the telephone call."

"What do you think?"

"Mr. Roberts, we can't indulge in thinking. With a case like this all we can do is work on it, let it develop and hope it will come out all right."

Ed closed the door upon the detectives and turned toward his children. He looked at them as if they were strangers, unrelated and unbelonging. Then he squatted and held out his arms and his son and daughter moved in and he gathered them close.

Monday morning, after warning Vicki and Rich to say nothing of their mother's absence, he dropped them at their school and drove downtown to start the slow conversion of paper assets to cash. During the drone of the bank home-loan officer's explanation of equity and principal, interest and prorated interest (all of which he knew as well as he knew all the tax dodges and vagaries of capital gains), he dredged up and remembered Roseanne's startling breakfast question which had posed an interesting financial problem through the fuzz of his accountant brain: "How much actual cash could you raise if you had to raise it?" Looking up over his cereal, he mentally computed: "Twenty-five thousand, I guess." Then, at the expression that passed over her face which he could not identify, he added with apology, "I'm a middle- or lower-middle-class businessman. There is the house—" He explained equity until she became bored, then added the possible value of the stocks which, despite being blue chip, did fluctuate. . .

And it was all coming out exactly as he had predicted. "Mr. Roberts, we could loan you \$15,000 on your property," and later, at the Investment House, "Mr. Roberts, we can get you \$10,000 at today's price, but I would advise—"

"Set up a second mortgage," instructed Ed at the bank. "Sell," he told the investment counselor.

His was a one-man business except during those first three-and-a-half months each year when he hired a typist to assist him, but today the

office was empty, the typist probably standing in an unemployment line. He checked with his answering service, looked through his mail, and drove to his suburb where he parked in front of the school his children attended and waited for dismissal time . . . "How long would it take?" he remembered Roseanne's question.

"How long would what take?" he had asked.

"Why, to get twenty-five thousand in cash?" He pondered the hypothetical problem with thoughtful sips of coffee. "A week, more or less," he decided. He had hit it on the nose, for the loan officer at the bank told him it would be a week before they could deliver the cash in hand, and the investment counselor came up with the same time period.

Ed sat in his car, waiting for his children, remembering Roseanne's account of a kidnapping, read from the news section of the morning paper while he studied the financial page over his breakfast. "Here's a woman kidnapped from View Heights," she had said . . . "Mom," interrupted Vicki, "our class is going to Reston Beach to study tidepools. Can I—" She was at the beauty parlor. He must have been waiting for her in her car—"I have to have a note from you, Mom." "For what?" "For the bus to go to the tidepools at Reston Beach." "O.K. The kidnapper is demanding \$500,000. My goodness, that's a half million. But then, the husband is connected with TV and they're all rich—" "I have to have the note today," whined Vicki. Roseanne had turned on her. "You'll get it, O.K.? How much could you raise if I were held for ransom?" That's the way the discussion had gone, with \$25,000 as an actual cash value of worth to follow.

The children were surprised to find their father waiting, reminding them that their mother was gone and their world changed.

While Ed had not been lavish with money, he was not stingy. He had set up a personal checking account for his wife and automatically, each month, deposited funds for the payment of family and household bills. In checking with the local bank on Tuesday, he was surprised to discover that, the Friday before, Roseanne had cashed a check in the amount of \$532.26, which cleaned out her account.

"Now," said Detective Donahue in Ed's living room, "would you have any idea as to the amount of money your wife was carrying with her?"

"Money?"

"In her purse. At the time she disappeared."

"No," said Ed. "I haven't any idea."

"Well, does she have any bank accounts?"

"No," said Ed.

Donahue told him that, so far, there had been no trace of the car, nor had they located a Mrs. Webb. "We checked you out," he said.

"I supposed you would," said Ed.

"You and your son were at Lake Sereno all right."

"I know."

"How about friends?"

"What friends?"

"Friends who might know of this Mrs. Webb. Who she is and where she lives."

"We have no friends out here; no close friends, that is . . ." Ed remembered Roseanne's often-voiced complaint: "You're gone all the time and I have no friends." "What's the matter with the neighbors? The Brownells and Andersons and those people on the corner?" he had asked. Her answer: "They're all old, that's what's the matter with them. They're even older than you . . ." Now that he thought about it, she had been taunting him with their age difference ever since he'd brought up his retirement plan.

"We had friends in the city," he explained to the detective, "but they all dropped away when we moved out here—distance, you know, and then too I was pretty much tied up with my new business . . ." He had told Roseanne, when he decided to break away from the accounting firm to start his own business, that his hours would be long for the first year or two, but he was sure it would pay off. A business of his own, he said, and a house out away from the city would be a good retirement hedge. "A *what?*" she asked. He explained that in fifteen years he could have the house paid off, the children would be gone so he could cut down his work to a part-time operation and still have a reasonable income. "I'd be sixty," he said, "independent and semiretired." She had looked at him then as if he were already ancient: "And what would I be with all my young years wasted away preparing for your old age?"

"The pictures we have of your wife," suggested the detective, "are they recent?"



"The snapshot was taken not long after we moved here. About a year ago, I'd guess, and the studio portrait—probably three or four years before that."

"She looks very young."

"She's only thirty-one." In March, Roseanne complained: "I want to have fun and go places and enjoy life while I'm still young." Ed had gulped the last of his coffee, looked at his watch and said, "Don't worry, you'll still be young in another month when the income-tax grind is over." "Yes, but you won't," she answered sharply and turned her face from his kiss.

On Wednesday, Ed took the children to school and drove to the city where he signed the freshly executed loan papers on his house. The bank officer was fidgety, peering over his glasses, warning Ed that his second trust deed carried a heavier rate of interest than did the first mortgage and it was a shame—was he absolutely certain he wanted the papers processed? Ed said no, he was not absolutely certain he wanted the papers processed, but he *was* absolutely certain it had to be done.

Assured that the money would be ready for him by Monday, May 3rd, Ed went to his office, checked through his mail, made a poor attempt to catch up with work held over during these three days of worry, and remembered that this was supposed to be the beginning, with his business now on its feet and the year's tax grind over, the very beginning of decent working hours at last . . . "You're home early," Roseanne had greeted him last Friday evening. "This is the way it will be from now on," he answered. He was feeling good, feeling free and expansive. "I thought Rich and I would take a fishing trip—" With Rich whooping and hollering, Ed had to raise his voice. "Then, I thought, on Sunday night you and I'd go into town and take in a show." She hadn't reacted, hadn't appeared interested and that seemed strange, not then while he was still floating on his euphoric cloud, but now that she was gone and he was left wifeless, scrabbling around trying to raise a ransom demand.

He closed up shop and hit the freeway. It was still early in the day. Since it would be a while before he could pick up the children, he stopped off at the house and, for the first time he could remember, mixed himself an afternoon drink. He was just returning the ice cubes to the refrigerator when the phone rang. He jumped, whirled and

stared at it for a moment before racing across the room to lift the receiver. "Hello," he shouted and received no answer. Oh God, he thought, knees trembling. "Hello," he repeated and a woman's voice answered, "Oh—"

In that first moment, he thought it was Roseanne's voice, then as the thunder in his ears lessened he heard, "Oh, I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number," and he was sure he had Mrs. Webb, a disconcerted Mrs. Webb, confused because he and not his wife had answered the phone in the afternoon.

"Mrs. Webb," he cried quickly to hold her, "you have the right number. I'm Ed Roberts, Roseanne's husband. You *are* Mrs. Webb, aren't you?" He thought he'd lost her for a moment. He could feel her indecision, and then her curiosity. "Webster," she corrected him and he knew the children had got the name wrong. Children, they listened only halfway and half the time. The cops would have found her once they'd exhausted the Webbs, gone on to the Webbers and finally the Websters, but he had found her first and he felt a frantic need to hang on.

"Mrs. Webster, my wife Roseanne, your friend, has been kidnapped—" He heard the gasp and felt her desire to break the connection and stay out of it. "If there's anything you could tell me—" he said.

"What could I tell you? What would I know?"

"She said she was spending last Saturday night with you, Mrs. Webster."

"Well, she didn't. She told me she might, but she didn't stay over. Is that when it happened?" Something clicked in Mrs. Webster's mind, either a self-serving need to separate herself from the night of the kidnapping as well as the kidnapper and the kidnapped, or a desire to be in on the action. In rapid-fire sequence, she offered her address. "You'd better come and see me," she said and hung up.

Ed started from the kitchen, remembered his drink, noticed the trembling of his hands, returned, drank the drink in one swallow, and left the house. He entered his station wagon, then remembered his children, consulted his watch, and drove to their school to wait an interminable fifteen minutes for dismissal time. Depositing them home, he warned them to lock the doors and said he would return shortly.

Then he drove to Granville Arms, the gaudy new apartment building

just five and a half miles from his house. He parked the station wagon, entered on the Ash Avenue side, and checked the tiers of mailboxes. He found Regina Webster listed on the third floor. He mounted the stairs, pressed the buzzer, and there she was, a fortyish blonde in scarlet pants, with dangling earrings and an uncertain smile.

First she offered him a drink which he declined, then she explained Saturday night. "Yes, Roseanne came here." She always came to the apartment—Roseanne had a car, Regina did not—they had a laugh or two, a drink, and then took off for the A-1, the A-Star or the A-Okay. At Ed's baffled expression, she explained, "They're bars over beyond the new shopping center, neighborhood bars, nice places where you can make friends—" It was where she had first met Roseanne on one of the many nights Ed worked late on tax reports.

"But she didn't spend Saturday night here, I swear it, though she'd said she might. She said you'd be away from home—"

Ed asked about the suitcase. Regina never saw one. Roseanne arrived at the apartment at seven-fifteen, maybe seven-thirty. They talked a while and had a drink . . . yes, she wore black pants, black turtleneck and a red coat, three-quarter sleeves, very sharp. Regina expected it to be a two- or three-hour evening at the A-1, A-Star, or A-Okay as usual, it was all she wanted, she was no swinger. A few drinks and some jokes—"But Roseanne, your wife, Mr. Roberts, was on a youth kick. She liked the kids."

"What kids?" he asked.

"Oh, all or any. There was one, though, she called Macho, early twenties, hairy, black leather jacket—"

"He was there Saturday night?"

"Yes. We made the rounds and he tagged after. Look, I was ready to knock it off by eleven, eleven-thirty; like I say, I'm no swinger—just a little fun and a few jokes. It was that way with Roseanne too. At eleven or so she drove me home and went on home herself and the evening was over. Usually. But not Saturday night."

Ed swallowed. "Yes? Saturday night?"

"Look, is that when it happened? The snatch, I mean."

"Saturday night or Sunday morning."

"Well, I don't know anything about it. Eleven-thirty, I said to her, 'Let's travel, I got this guy breathing down my neck,' but she said no, so I got a cab. My God, I should have stayed with her—" Regina spent

a moment in guilty self-recrimination, then said with finality,

"That's all I know. She never showed up and I tried to get her at home a couple of times to find out what happened and today I got you." She looked up at Ed with belated surprise. "Roseanne said you were old. You're not so old."

Ed drove through the new shopping center. Beyond it, he located the A-1, the A-Star, and A-Okay bars clustered innocently and quietly in the late afternoon sun. Then he drove on to the local police station where he informed Donahue that the woman's name was not Webb but Webster, that she lived in the Granville Arms apartment building, that she had seen his wife on Saturday night, and that she knew a little but not too much—not as much, thought Ed, as he knew. Donahue said he'd get on it.

Ed piled the kids in the car and took them to a drive-in where they loaded up with hamburgers and french fries and he had himself a beer.

Thursday morning Vicki refused to eat her breakfast and declared that she wasn't going to school. Rich said that if his sister didn't go to school neither would he and burst into tears.

Ed's anger was immediate and explosive and they both howled. He realized, as he stared at his noisy open-mouthed children, that the shock was over; the cushioned, mind-blocking shock was gone and each of them, husband and father, daughter and son, were feeling the impact of an irrational loss. He wanted to strike out, this man who thought precisely in mathematical verities, who lived within a securely passive pattern—but strike out how? and at empty space?

So he took the children with him that Thursday, down to the city where he signed his stock certificates, receiving a certified check for \$10,000 which he placed in his wallet while thinking of murder.

Donahue reported that night. He had checked out Mrs. Webster—a divorcée—they'd keep an eye on her. Ed shook his head, she was not a part of this hassle.

The bartenders, reported Donahue, remembered Mrs. Roberts dimly from Saturday night. A Macho? Well, there were a lot of macho types . . . "Look, how are you bearing up?" asked the detective.

"O.K.," said Ed.

"The kids?"

"O.K.," he said, remembering their morning outburst when the shock lifted and the dam burst, remembering his son's pallid stoicism and his daughter's silent tears when he saw each off to bed. "They're O.K. under the circumstances."

On Friday, Ed presented the \$10,000 check to the bank, signed his final papers for the \$15,000 loan, and left instructions that the entire \$25,000 be converted to cash in small, unmarked bills to be waiting for him on Monday. He took the children to the zoo, out to lunch, and then to a Disney movie. He worried about the work that was piling up in his office, observed his children's granite faces, and resolved to kill someone as soon as he could find the one he must kill.

On Saturday night, he watched TV reruns that he had not seen before and was not seeing then while the two detectives made the rounds of the A-1, the A-Star and A-Okay bars, checking out Saturday night regulars to discover that, yeah, someone had seen a red car parked in front that was gone before closing time and someone else remembered a red coat and a few young hairy guys. "Not much to go on," Donahue reported on Sunday.

"Not much," agreed Ed, who had given the children their breakfast without eating any himself and sent them to the patio to read the comics.

"Well, there never is in a case like this. We'll try to trace the call when it comes in tomorrow, but we haven't a chance. If you can get him to hang on . . ." Donahue shook his head.

On Monday morning, May the 3rd, Ed sat at his cluttered office desk, notepad and pencil beside the phone, while Donahue waited at the typewriter table by the extension. The children, on the floor with a checkerboard between them, stared at the checkers without making a move.

"I had to bring them with me," Ed explained to the detective, without adding that he was the children's comfort as they were his.

Traffic sounds filtered up from the street, a discordant hum. A siren sounded, the hands of the office clock crept slowly—ten minutes, nine, eight minutes to eleven. The children were watching the clock. They jumped when, at precisely eleven o'clock, the phone rang. Ed pounced

as did Donahue, each lifting a receiver. Ed yelled, "Hello," and received no answer. "Hello," he shouted. "I've got the money," Ed shouted, "now tell me how I can get my wife . . ." He heard a click. "Is she all right?"

"Roberts," said Donahue gently. "Roberts, he's gone."

Ed gathered up his children and drove to the bank where he received a box that had once held a ream of bond paper and now contained \$25,000 in small unmarked bills, neatly packaged according to denomination. The bank manager, without fact and on supposition only, protested timorously, "Look, Mr. Roberts, I don't like this. Have you contacted the authorities?" "I have," said Ed, "and I don't like it either." He picked up the box and left with his children.

As he drove the freeway toward his doubly mortgaged house, he considered the mathematical probability of an accident with a burst of flying currency and scattered bodies. He moved into the slow lane. There was only one way, he figured, for this thing to end, only one conclusion after taking into consideration all the probabilities—just one—an inevitable death, but not on the freeway with the death involving himself or his children.

"Will it be over pretty soon?" asked Rich from the back seat.

"Pretty soon," said Ed.

"And will Mom come home?" asked Vicki.

Ed did not reply.

He sat trapped with the ransom money in his home that afternoon and evening, doors locked, waiting for Donahue who was in the post office sorting-room checking the incoming mail as it was trucked from the city and delivered from local postal drops. The children watched interminable TV game shows and old F.B.I. dramas. When they had lived in the city apartment before Ed became his own boss without leisure time, he and Roseanne had often viewed the detective/mystery series then on the tube, and as he remembered these filmed tales of kidnap and extortion, not a single ransom payer had ever had to babysit for his children while money-sitting the kidnapper's demands.

The letter did not arrive at the local post office that night. Nor was it found the following morning when the postal clerks sorted the morning pickups.

It did not arrive with the afternoon mail delivery, late because the carrier was a substitute. The letter arrived that night, at about seven-thirty, as it was beginning to get dark. Mr. Brownell, a neighbor, rang the doorbell and handed forth the letter with apology. "This was placed in my mailbox by mistake. We just got home and found it."

The letter, hand-printed with a felt-tip pen, instructed Ed to drive to Orchard Road that night and at ten-thirty to toss out the ransom money at the big For Sale sign near the second traffic light. Then he was to return home and wait for a telephone call an hour later for information as to where he could find his wife, safe and sound—"if you have followed directions," warned the letter, adding, underlined, "Drive your station wagon. Come alone. Don't make any mistakes."

Orchard Road was a private unpaved three-mile stretch that intersected once-flourishing orchard land now unworked, unoccupied, dying, and up for sale.

The road entrance, from an old and rarely used highway, dead-ended against a hill. "If we'd gotten the letter in time, we could have staked out the area, set up a watch, made plans; now we'll have to wing it," said Donahue, furious that he'd spent an evening and morning in the post office sorting-room only to have the letter slip through and get fouled up in someone else's box.

"No," answered Ed and said he would follow directions exactly. He would go along, make the drop, and return to wait for the call. Donahue offered alternative suggestions, Ed shook his head; he had it all figured—a mathematical problem and he had to prove his result. He laid out the map and placed his finger on Orchard Road, east and north of the city's bedroom communities, somewhat isolated, the next green space to be gobbled up by tract builders.

Donahue was studying the letter. "He says you are to drive your station wagon."

"Yes."

"He knows you've got a station wagon."

"He knows."

"He's been watching you or has had contact."

"Not directly."

"Do you have a gun?"

"No," said Ed.

"Do you want one?"

"I don't want to kill him."

"For protection."

"I don't need any protection. He wants the money. I'll give him the money, then afterward, once the call comes in—if it comes—you can set up roadblocks, stakeouts, anything to get him."

"It'll be too late then."

"He needs the time to see if the money is real, if it's all there, and time for the release." Ed glanced at his children who were always in evidence—not absent as in the television shows he vaguely remembered.

He left a worried Donahue at nine-thirty, the children ready for bed, but up, unable to sleep.

He followed the red line he had drawn on the map through a megalopolis of individual but look-alike communities with brightly lit shopping centers and dimly lit residential sections. It was a little after ten when he reached the old highway, rarely used and on this Tuesday night not at all. He almost missed the turnoff as he drove cautiously over uneven asphalt between tall eucalyptus trees. Suddenly, he braked and backed and pulled into view in the glare of his headlights what he thought he had caught from the corner of his eyes—a wooden sign spelling out ORCHARD ROAD.

It was twenty after ten. He turned and entered what was little more than a lane, unpaved and rutted. The For Sale sign, a quarter of a mile later, was nailed to a dead tree just before the second traffic light.

He stopped and let the motor idle. He rolled down his window, peered through the shadows, and listened—hearing Roseanne's voice again over the breakfast table . . . "Well, if I were kidnapped, would you pay it?" "Pay what?" he had asked. "The money, of course." She was impatient, angry with his inattention. "If I could." "Well, you said you could raise \$25,000." He had gulped the last of his coffee. "Yes, Roseanne."

He picked up the box heavy with ransom money from the seat at his side and heaved it out the open window. It gave back a dull thud as it landed on the dry weeds on the ground beneath the For Sale sign. He raced the motor, turned the wheels, and had to maneuver over the shoulder at the side of the narrow road and back again to make his



turn. The headlights lit up old shed-like buildings, distant shadows within the skeleton-like shadows of the trees.

Back on the eucalyptus-lined highway, his face and neck felt cold and damp and he could feel the sweat roll between his shoulder blades. Gradually he relaxed as he drove, knowing that now the first part was over, the second would be finished in an hour, and if his hypothetical computations proved correct, which he was sure they would for he was an accurate mathematician, the last and final part would present itself for solution in a matter of a week or two.

There was no call that night.

The next day, the weathered packing sheds in the dying orchard were investigated and showed recent occupancy—empty beer cans, two Colonel Sanders' Fried Chicken buckets, a used razor blade, and a quantity of dark hair. Also, a puddle of oil and the tracks of a motorcycle, these same tracks printed in the dust of the ploughed earth past the For Sale sign and down Orchard Road.

Thursday, a waitress at the Colonel Sanders closest to the old highway and Orchard Road remembered a couple of guys who came in for takeouts, one on Monday, she thought, and the other on Tuesday. She remembered because they were so cute, with the same I've-got-it-all-together attitude, same voice, same shrug, leather-jacketed, slim, dark, and with a slouch. They could have been the same guy, except the first was bearded and the second clean-shaven.

The stolen motorcycle, abandoned, was found that same day near where a van had been reported stolen. The police were able to lift one fairly good fingerprint, not the owner's, from the handlebar of the cycle.

Ed talked to his children. He was not accustomed to talking to his children. For two years, more than two years during the time he was setting up his and their future security, buying the house, starting his own business, carrying the heavy work-and-worry load, he had seen them fleetingly . . . "How's school? What are your grades? You're growing tall. You'll be a beauty . . ." These asides had been stored in the back of his mind to be remembered and discussed as soon as this last grueling income-tax period was past; then maybe he could coast a bit and become reacquainted with these children who were his and allow them to learn to know him.

He talked to his children, eight and ten years old, and he had to talk on an adult level, for this was an adult problem facing them. He found them sophisticated, having viewed extortion and violence, abduction and murder beyond the children's TV hour when their mother had visited "Mrs. Webb" on those many nights their father had worked in his city office.

"So you must know," Ed said carefully, "in a case of this kind where the ransom demand has been paid, but the promised telephone call has not been received, the outlook is not promising."

"You mean Mom has been killed?" asked Vicki, and Rich answered her question, "Of course she's dead." They were sure then of what Donahue supposed and Ed was willing to prognosticate.

Ed visited an employment agency and interviewed housekeepers, choosing an older motherly woman to live in his home and care for his children, preparing again for an orderly life, the children back in school, himself at work. "Is it over?" asked Vicki. "It's over," answered her father, knowing it was not.

The Nova was found on Friday, parked behind a warehouse where many cars were often parked, so it had been overlooked. Impounded and investigated, it revealed nothing.

A van was found parked on a side street in a small city up the coast and there the trail ended. The police had a single fingerprint which might or might not be that of the kidnapper, plus a waitress's before-and-after description. The investigation would become routine and the case would remain open.

Three weeks after their mother disappeared and two weeks after their father had paid to try to get her back, the children were adjusting to home with a surrogate mother and without their own. They mourned their dead mother and considered the case closed.

To Ed, back at work, the case was neither routinely open nor was it mercifully closed. He was waiting for its finish according to his subjective as well as objective calculations, yet when it came, the following week, the telephone call was a surprise, an aftershock, a final blow.

"Roseanne?" he cried. "Roseanne!" as if he couldn't believe she was there and alive, yet he had known she was all along.

She asked the questions he had known she would ask—had he paid

the ransom and when? She told the lies he knew she would tell—she had been bound, gagged, and blindfolded out on the edge of nowhere and had escaped at last. She was angry and frustrated, not tearful and frightened—he knew that was the way it would be too. Where was she now? asked Ed, and had she called the police? It was coming out exactly as he knew it would come out. She was what he had been sure she was. He would now go forth and finish this damned mathematical exercise with his own mathematical solution.

It was late afternoon. He closed his ledgers, straightened his desk, and took off for home. He drove into the garage and selected a shovel from the garden tools in the rack. He tossed the shovel into the back of the station wagon, went into the house, told the children that he must make a business trip, turned down his housekeeper's offer of an early dinner, consulted the map with the red drawn line, unfolded it to include a further section, traced a route with his finger, slipped the map in his pocket, got into his station wagon, and backed down the driveway.

He took the old highway, past the dying orchard, driving slowly, noting that it was as deserted as on the night he'd driven the lane and tossed out the money. A car passed him and another, probably each on the way home from work. It was six-thirty. By nine, the old highway would be empty of traffic. He took back roads and side roads, turning off to stop at the edge of arroyos and look down into deep gullies filled with brush, and dark in the sunset. He slowed down beside pastureland, green with irrigation, the earth soft and pliable with clumps of screening trees.

It was twilight when he reached the pass that had once resounded to the beat of horses' hooves in old Western movies. He looked down at the set that had been used for many years, but no more with the epic Western out of fashion. It was now empty of life, drab in the twilight except for a new and garish motel built surprisingly on the dusty street in the midst of the weatherbeaten buildings.

Roseanne emerged from the motel looking sleek in green, but with a disheveled mind and a tumbled story. She tossed the suitcase to the back of the station wagon, flounced in the front, and began her story. Ed switched on the headlights in the gathering dark and listened while he drove toward the pass.

She began at the beginning as if she'd rehearsed it—that Saturday

night when she and Mrs. Webster sat innocently and innocuously in the bar—this young man, a hippie, she didn't know who he was, needed a lift. She left Mrs. Webster and drove him, a Good Samaritan act; he overpowered her, blindfolded and gagged her, and drove and drove. Finally he stopped, got her out of the car and took off the blindfold and she was in some shack—

"Where?" asked Ed.

"Out here somewhere. There are shacks and cabins all over these hills." She was right. He could see them, perched in derelict abandon among the rocks and trees.

The kidnapper had pulled off the gag and asked how much her husband would put out to get her back . . . "How much could you raise if I were kidnapped?" remembered Ed.

She told him. She had to tell him. He said he'd get it . . . "How long would it take you to get \$25,000?" Ed remembered. And when he got the money, he would free her—so she waited, bound to a cot in a shack, fed by someone who came in once a day, and what could she think after all this time? Either that Ed had not paid the ransom money or that the kidnapper had not come for her. She talked as she had at breakfast time, words bouncing off his financial pages.

Then she freed herself at last from the bonds that had held her tight—Ed glanced at her wrists on her lap in the light of the dashboard, slim and unmarked. She staggered forth, stumbling down the rocky hillside—Ed stopped the car and switched on the light to look down at her sandals, frail and shining, on the floorboards. He switched off the light and turned from the pass to the valley. She had stumbled down the rocky hillside until she found that old movie set and the motel and cleaned up and phoned him.

"Why not the police?" asked Ed.

"No," she said, "it would have been embarrassing."

He thought of pursuing his questions, then abandoned the idea—he could fill in the loopholes as he did with each income-tax client. Roseanne was a deductible. He took all the side roads and the back roads and slowed at the arroyos, the bright eyes of oncoming cars causing him to pick up speed until he reached the pastureland with its black screen of trees. He swerved, entered a gap, parked behind the trees, and switched off his lights.

Before Roseanne had the time to pose a question, for he was a

quick-thinking and accurate mathematician, he grasped her around the throat and squeezed until she was dead.

He could hear the crickets, and a single mockingbird in the trees. He opened the glove compartment and got out his flashlight. Leaning down, he opened Roseanne's handbag. In it, he found a few coins and a motel receipt for twenty-five days' lodging and meals—\$528.46. He crumpled the receipt and stuffed it in his pocket. He climbed over the seat and crouched in the back of the station wagon and opened the suitcase. There he found several changes of outer clothing and underclothing, a nightie and a robe.

He laid the lighted flashlight on the floor of the station wagon, lifted Roseanne's body from the front to the back, undressed her and redressed her in the black pants, black turtleneck, and red coat she had been wearing that Saturday night more than three weeks ago. He folded the clothing he had taken off her and folded everything from the suitcase except for one change of underclothing, the nightie, and robe, and laid it all on the floor of the station wagon by her body. He closed up the suitcase and closed up the handbag and laid them both on the body.

He straightened and listened, hearing the sound of a car far down the road. He switched off the flashlight and waited until the roar and the lights of the car passed and left him with the mimicry of the mockingbird and the click of the crickets.

His eyes now accustomed to the faint light of the moon, he picked up his shovel, walked a few paces into the pastureland, and began to dig. Carefully, he set aside the clumps of alfalfa and topsoil and dug a shallow but roomy grave for a lying wife caught up in her own trickery. He dropped Roseanne in the trench and laid her suitcase and handbag on top of her. He filled the hole and placed the alfalfa clumps on top. The ground was soft and damp. It would appear to be undisturbed soon, and when the farmer plowed next season to plant his new crop, the plow would dig up the body of a kidnap victim, killed by her kidnapper, dressed as she had been dressed on the night of the kidnapping, along with a suitcase packed for an overnight stay with a friend, and a handbag with a few coins left over from a Saturday night drink or two.

Ed tossed the shovel to the back of the station wagon, returned the flashlight to the glove compartment and backed from the screen of trees. It was nine-fifteen. There wasn't a car in sight. He hit the road,

turned onto the old highway, passed the dying orchard, and was home by a quarter of ten.

The children were in bed, the housekeeper was watching television. "Back from your business trip?" she said.

"Yes, back and finished," Ed answered her.

"Would you like something to eat?" asked the housekeeper.

"Fine," said Ed.

While she bustled in the kitchen, he replaced the shovel in the rack in the garage, picked up the folded clothing from the back of the station wagon, and took it to his and Roseanne's room, hung it up and put it in drawers, crumpled the motel receipt from his pocket, laid it in an ashtray, lit a match, and burned it to ashes. Then he went to the kitchen to eat the sandwich and drink the hot soup the housekeeper had ready. "Do the children speak much of their mother?" he asked her.

"Well, not too much, sir," she said. "They seem to be reconciled."

"That she's dead?"

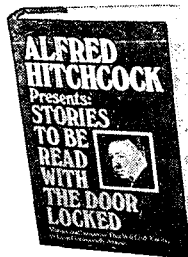
"Well, yes, I guess so, sir."

"I am afraid she is," said Ed.

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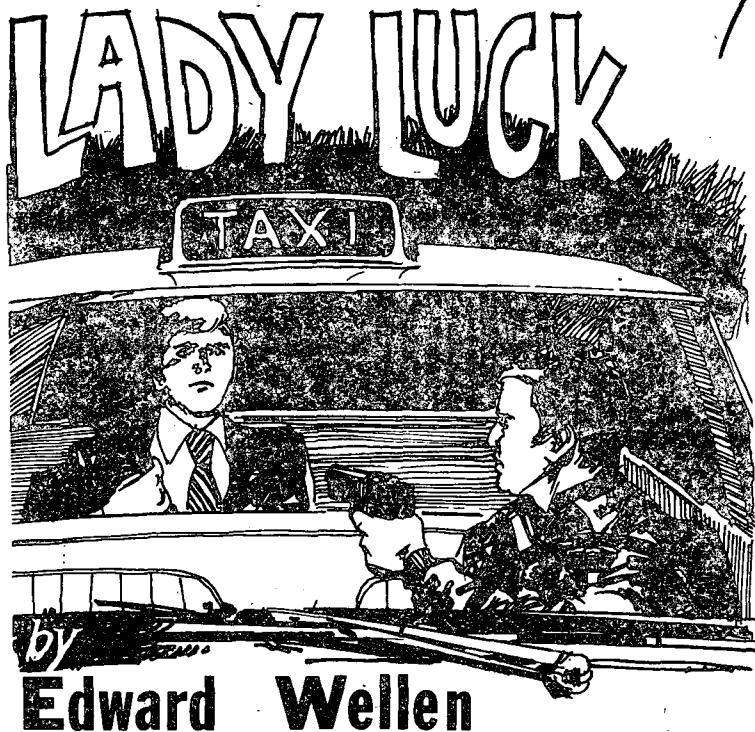
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Lady Luck smiled at last upon Mark Sexton. Three hundred grand made a big beautiful smile.

She had been with him from the beginning tonight, for him to have gotten into the game with the high rollers at the Diamond Club in the first place. She had breathed her warmth on the small stake he had started out with, building it up till he suddenly found himself playing with the big boys. Lady Luck stayed with him all evening. He raked in

everything on the table. It came to some three hundred grand.

He shivered. It should have been with happiness. He should have been the happiest he ever was in his life. But he felt scared to death.

The way everyone eyed him and his winnings he knew he was in big trouble. He couldn't see this pack of wolves letting him, a guy from nowhere with no connections, walk away with his winnings.

His mind raced. Sure, no one would jump him here, right in front of the others. But he felt even surer somebody would, somewhere between the casino and his hotel room. He had no intention of going back to his hotel room. Once he got his mitts on the cash, he meant to get right out of town, not stopping to pick up any of his things. With three hundred grand he could buy himself lots and lots of brand-new high-class things.

Only he had to find a way to throw the wolves off. He knew they'd be on his tail as soon as he left the casino, and he wouldn't get far before somebody jumped him. Maybe somebody else would jump the somebody that jumped him, but that wouldn't brighten the picture much for Mark Sexton. Mark Sexton would still be out his three hundred grand.

But first to get his mitts on the cash. He couldn't think straight under all these crooked looks; maybe the money would inspire him.

The manager took him into the office and opened the safe and counted out three hundred one-thousand-dollar bills, plus a few hundred-dollar bills. His winnings exactly. The manager made him count them over to satisfy both of them.

Then the manager gave Mark a heavy brown envelope to put them in. Since Mark did all the handling from the count on, there could be no later accusation of sleight of hand. The count was right and the bills were right. Up to now Mark had never seen a G-note in his life. But he knew these were the real thing.

Why not? He could tell the manager was figuring on getting them back in his hands before the night ended.

Mark played dumb. They shook hands and Mark left the office with the envelope full of money in his inside pocket.

From the main gambling room all those eyes were looking his way. To go out the front door he would have to pass through that room.

Without breaking step he headed towards the men's room. He hadn't cased the joint with this in mind but he had unconsciously ab-



sorbed a good notion of the layout. The casino had a parking lot out in back. At the far end of the parking lot stood a fence. All he had to do was hop the fence, cross over a few blocks, and hail a cab to the airport. So instead of stopping at the men's room he kept on toward the employees' entrance.

He opened the door and looked out. He waited till his eyes got used to the dark. It was a good thing he hadn't walked right out. He spotted shapes in at least two cars—and they weren't couples necking. They were sitting there waiting for him in case he came out that way. He would never have reached the fence.

So he backtracked and went to the men's room to think. He looked around vaguely and noticed a newspaper someone had tossed into the wastebasket. It gave him an idea. And he found himself alone in there long enough to carry out the idea.

He tore the newspaper up into bill-size strips and switched them for the bills in the brown envelope. He started to stash the bills inside the paper-towel dispenser, only when he opened it up he saw the thing was just about all out of paper towels.

It hit him that was maybe why the attendant wasn't on hand—he had gone to his closet or storeroom for a fresh supply. If Mark left the bills in the dispenser, the attendant would be sure to find them when he put them in, and goodbye three hundred grand.

Mark closed the dispenser without putting the cash in. A moment later the attendant came in whistling, carrying a bundle of towels. Mark washed up. In the mirror he watched the attendant put the towels in and saw the attendant wasn't going out again.

Mark left slowly.

He had to find another place to stash the bills for a couple of hours.

Either that, or try and con the manager into keeping the brown envelope in the safe overnight. Mark's guess was that the manager would turn him down, nicely but firmly. All the same, it seemed worth a try. He had nothing to lose, since of course he would never show up to pick up the envelope, and he had three hundred grand to hold onto. Nothing to lose either way.

He went back down the hall to the manager's office. The door stood half open. Mark's knock opened it wider. The manager wasn't there. What was there, right next to the desk, was a beautiful big wastebasket. In two strides Mark was beside it and digging into it.

It was half full of junk mail, old menus, balled scraps of figuring. Nothing anyone would look at twice. Mark worked fast, stuffing the three hundred grand into junk mail envelopes, and buried them at the bottom.

For some reason beyond reason he held out the hundred-dollar bills, folding them and sticking them into his shoe. He finished just in time. The manager found Mark standing waiting for him.

The manager raised an eyebrow. "Something more I can do for you, Mr. Sexton? Perhaps you'd like to get back into play?"

"Thanks. No, thanks. I'm not going to push my luck. But you can do something for me. Would you keep this envelope in your safe overnight?"

He had judged the manager right. The manager turned him down, nicely but firmly. The house had already paid Mr. Sexton off and just couldn't take the responsibility.

Mark nodded ruefully. "I understand your point. Good night."

"Good night, sir. Come again. You're always welcome."

Going out through the gambling room, with all those snake eyes taking in the bulge the brown envelope made, Mark felt like someone heading for the chopping block.

The casino doorman whistled up a hack. Mark got in and tipped the doorman and let the doorman hear him tell the hackie the name of his hotel. He leaned back as the taxi pulled away but he kept his eyes on the rear-view mirror. Sure enough, a car parked across the street switched on its headlights and swung into traffic behind them.

It would come to a head soon and Mark felt somewhat glad. It would be good to get it over with. He hid his smile—it would have been a nervous smile anyway—and leaned forward. He tapped the driver's shoulder. "See if you can shake the car that's following us."

The driver sat up as though a bee had stung him. "Say, what gives?"

"Just lose the tail and you'll get something extra."

"I ain't sure I like this, Mac, but O.K."

He floored the gas pedal and screeched them around corners and in and out of traffic lanes. For a guy who wasn't sure he liked it, the driver did a lot of grinning at the hairier close shaves.

When Mark felt sure they had wiped the headlights from the mirror for good he tapped the driver's shoulder again. "O.K., it looks like we shook them. Now take me to my hotel."

The driver nodded. "Gotcha."

But he headed further out of town and stopped on a lonely stretch of road.

"This isn't anywhere near where I'm going," Mark said.

The driver pointed a .45 at him. "This says it is."

"I always believe a .45. What do you want?"

Mark got out slowly and stood leaning forward with his hands on the side of the cab the way the driver told him to.

The driver frisked him but found nothing except Mark's thin wallet and the fat envelope. He pocketed the envelope without opening it, and tossed the wallet into the brush. He waved Mark away from the taxi, got back in behind the wheel, and the cab spat gravel tearing off.

For the benefit of the rear-view mirror Mark shook his fist at the dwindling cab. But he laughed out loud at what the hackie was heading back into. The guy had to be the casino manager's boy, because the doorman wouldn't have whistled up just any old hack for Mark. And Mark could guess that when the guy handed the manager the envelope full of worthless paper it would cross the manager's mind he was double-crossing him.

But Mark stopped laughing to save his breath. The chase had lasted quite a while and he was farther out in the middle of nowhere than he had expected to find himself. It was going to take him longer to make his way back than he had counted on.

He felt a flutter of foreboding as he crept up on the casino. He came in the back way—hopped the fence and crossed the Diamond Club's empty parking lot to the Diamond Club itself. He hoped he wasn't walking into a trap.

He found the place mostly dark. Lights burned only where the old cleaning woman was working. The employees' entrance was unlocked and Mark had no trouble slipping in.

The old girl was vacuuming and didn't hear him enter. He slid past her back and into the manager's office. She had been there already. The wastebasket was empty.

For a long minute everything shut off in his mind, even the sound of vacuuming. Then he came to himself and hurried out to where the cleaning woman was. She jumped when he touched her shoulder and shut off the vacuum.

Mark let her think he was on the staff and asked her what she had done with the stuff in the boss's wastebasket.

She looked at him. "Bless you, sir, I did what I always do. I burnt it in the big wire basket out back."

Mark rushed outside and saw what he had missed on the way in, a still warm big wire basket not far from the employees' entrance.

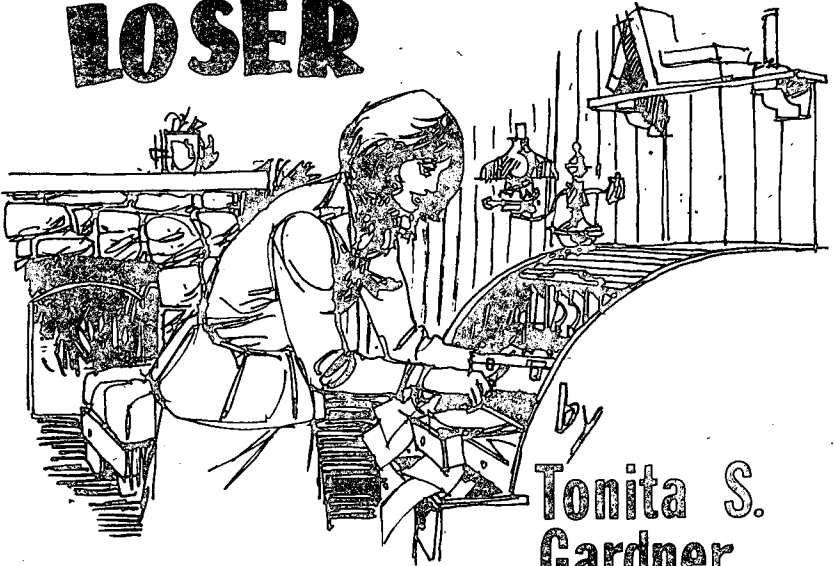
He stared down at the circle of ashes, the nothingness of his winnings, and felt like weeping. Then he laughed till his eyes got wet. He still had the hundred-dollar bills in his shoe. They came to the stake he had started out with. Maybe Lady Luck was trying to show him gambling was the wrong racket for him. What a dame! He walked away to meet the dawn.

The cleaning woman went on about her cleaning, wearily but thoroughly. She waited till she felt sure the man had gone, then she smiled. Three hundred grand made a big beautiful smile.



*In certain cases, it doesn't matter whether you favor fire or ice . . .*

# THE BIGGEST LOSER



by  
**Tonita S.  
Gardner**

Judith's plane wouldn't take off until the next morning, but she was packed and ready to go. She wasn't supposed to leave until Harry got back, of course, but she had no intention of waiting, even though she'd promised him she would.

"You'll only be gone a few days," she'd told him before he flew up to Maine the day before. "We can sign the papers when you get back."

But by the time he got back she'd be in Palm Beach, where lots of

THE BIGGEST LOSER

.89

rich men went to get some sun and spend some money. Why should she be rushed into giving Harry the divorce?

She finished her second cup of coffee, reached for the morning paper, and lit a cigarette. As far as she was concerned, there was no rush at all. Harry was the anxious one. In his eagerness to remarry Margaret, he'd do anything—maybe even give Judith the settlement she intended to hold out for.

She flipped through the paper, mulling over the ads for furs and diamonds that Harry the Tightwad no longer bought her. Noticing some earrings that matched the gold bead necklace she was wearing, she started to rip out the ad, then checked the other side of the page to see if she had overlooked anything—but it was only the obituaries. She started to turn back the page when she caught a glimpse of a name among the death notices. She looked again and there it was: "Hammond, Margaret J. Died suddenly in her 45th year. Reposing at Whipple's Funeral Home, 88 North Street. Services Monday at 11."

It took several minutes before she could begin to believe it. Poor Margaret—the biggest loser of all. But what a joke on Harry! With a triumphant flourish, she tore the notice out of the paper and stowed it in her wallet. Perhaps, to carry her joke even further, she'd mail it to him from Florida.

Thinking about it, Judith almost laughed, until it struck her that with Margaret dead Harry might decide to renegotiate the settlement. If that happened the joke would be on her. She smashed her cigarette into an ashtray. Instead of getting more, she'd wind up with peanuts. Unless—her only hope—they signed the agreement before he heard about Margaret. Once he got home, there was no telling how quickly that would happen. Someone would phone him, or he'd try to call Margaret himself. She could picture him now, puttering around the Maine cabin, closing it up for the winter.

The cabin had no phone.

So what was she waiting for?

Stuffing the papers into her purse, she threw on her coat, grabbed the car keys, and raced out to the garage.

During the long drive to Maine she congratulated herself on her cleverness in making the most of a bad situation and figured how she would allay Harry's suspicions about her unexpected arrival. Pulling into the secluded property he'd inherited from an old uncle who'd

shared his silly passion for bird watching, she parked the car next to the one Harry had rented at the airport. As she hurried toward the cabin she shivered at the blast of cold air that whipped at her.

Letting herself in the cabin, she was surprised at its warmth until she remembered Harry mentioning that there was electric heat. Not that the cold would have bothered *him*. He was like a radiator. Removing her coat, she sank into a musty slipcovered chair and, lighting a cigarette, waited for him to return.

If only he would come back so she could get it over with. She finished her cigarette and went for another. The pack was empty. Why hadn't she remembered to buy some when she stopped for gas along the way? She went through her purse inch by inch, but there was nothing but a few flecks of tobacco.

She started to pace the small living room. The thought of Harry finding out about Margaret before the papers were signed made her so jumpy she would have settled for one of the menthol cigarettes Harry smoked when he grew tired of his smelly pipe. His old leather jacket was hanging on the hook near the door. She checked the pockets. There were no cigarettes. In the inside breast pocket, however, she discovered that Harry had left his wallet behind. Funny, he never did at home.

A cursory inspection of the wallet turned up the usual: money, credit cards, a receipt for some dry cleaning. She poked inside the celluloid windows, digging behind Harry's credit cards to see if he still carried her wedding portrait in spite of everything. Yes, there, he still had it; she drew it out. And screamed.

On her beautifully posed photograph, to her horror, Harry had inked in a mouthful of vampirelike fangs, while on her elegant Eve of Rome eyes he'd drawn in two huge dollar signs.

She stared at her picture, trying to reconcile this side of her husband's personality with the one she knew. How he must despise her! Mild-mannered, soft-spoken Harry, who wouldn't swat a fly if he could open a window and let it out instead.

Oh, he was a sly one—and as if her mutilated photograph wasn't bad enough, on checking further she discovered that, right next to her ruined picture, he still carried the wedding portrait of himself and Margaret, their bland puerile faces mooning at each other above the neatly lettered message: "Harry, darling, I'll love you forever. Mar-

garet."

She'd show him how long forever was! Setting a match to her picture, she transferred Margaret's obituary from her wallet to his, making sure he'd see it by folding it around the wedding portrait and slipping both between a pair of fives in the bill compartment.

She'd no sooner replaced the wallet in his pocket than she heard his footsteps on the path outside the cabin.

He came in, his binoculars swinging from a leather strap around his neck, his pipe jutting from the pocket of his wool plaid shirt. Removing his glasses, he rubbed his tired-looking eyes.

"I saw the car outside," he said. He looked at her quizzically. "May I ask what brings you here?"

"Harry," she fibbed, "you know that cruise I was dying to go on—the one that was all booked? Well, the travel agent called this morning to say they had a last-minute cancellation. But the ship leaves at noon tomorrow and since I promised I'd be home to sign the papers, I figured I'd bring them here to take care of before I go."

He regarded her suspiciously. "Is that the only reason?"

Her pulse began to race. "What do you mean?"

"Forgive me if I'm wrong this time, but you're not usually so—cooperative."

"Do you want the divorce or don't you?" She withdrew the papers from her purse, handed him a pen.

Signing both copies, he watched her while she did the same. She put hers in her purse; he went over and put his in his jacket, next to the wallet. "Well," he said softly, "that does it."

"As soon as it's final, will you marry Margaret?"

"If you must know, yes."

She smiled.

"Judith," he said, "now that we've settled this like civilized adults, perhaps you'll give me a lift back to the city. There's supposed to be a storm coming on and I may not be able to get a plane tomorrow."

"Harry," she said, "you know I can't stay overnight just to give you a lift."

"We can leave here in a little over an hour," he told her. "We can take both cars and I'll drop mine off when we pass the airport. But—" he removed a bagful of seeds from a cabinet "—I'll need about ten minutes to put food out for the birds, and then I have to go over to



Wallabou to pick up some perishables I ordered." Without waiting to see if she agreed, he reached for his jacket and went out.

The last thing she wanted was Harry's company all the way home. As soon as he disappeared into the woods behind the cabin, she'd be on her way.

But meanwhile she needed a cigarette. Desperately. Where could Harry have put his? As she searched the room, her eyes lit on the most likely place: an old rolltop desk.

Rummaging through the top drawer, she found a flashlight, candles, and matches—but no cigarettes. She opened the next drawer. It contained some typed instructions about how to close the fireplace damper, how to light the kerosene burner, and how to shut off the water and drain the pipes. She tossed the instructions aside and tried the third drawer. In it was a metal strongbox. Locked. She hardly expected to find any cigarettes inside, but as with the wallet there might be something she should see. She examined the lock. It could be forced open with the right tool. Harry would know she'd done it, of course, but it didn't matter. She was through with him for good.

She hurried to the kitchen and found a small knife with a sharp point. Wedging it into the keyhole, she worked it back and forth, up and down, until, with a slight click, the lock snapped open.

She lifted the lid. Inside were some envelopes. She picked up the first one and withdrew a sheet of paper with yesterday's date at the top in Harry's handwriting. Scanning it, she saw that he'd listed hundreds of shares of blue-chip stocks—AT&T, IBM, General Motors—all at current market value. In the second envelope, she discovered still another surprise—a copy of Harry's uncle's will. She started to read it, and the moment she did, with a rude shock of awareness, she realized where the money for the stocks had come from, realized that she had been cheated out of a huge amount of alimony. If this document was true Harry was very very rich.

She read no further. Rage mingled with incredulity and she began shaking so hard that she could barely hold the will in her hand. She replaced it in the box and stowed the box back in the bottom drawer.

Yes, Harry had put one over on her, and there was nothing she could do about it. Her lawyer had warned her that once she signed the papers, even if she went to court, she'd have little chance of increasing her allotment.

She had to get the papers back! Of course Harry would sooner die than part with them, but in that case—she kicked the drawer shut—she'd be delighted to attend his funeral.

His widow.

Why not?

Of course she could be his widow! Harry deserved to die. And, best of all, she had the perfect opportunity. She could do away with him, head for home, and who would be the wiser? But she had to plan it so that it would look like an accident. She consulted her watch. Harry had said he'd be going to Wallabou after he fed the birds, and would be gone about an hour. That would give her more than enough time. But how could she think clearly without a cigarette? Hearing Harry's footsteps, she accosted him as he entered with the empty feed bag.

"Harry—" she forced herself to smile at him "—I could use a cigarette."

He proffered a pack. Only one was left. She lit it, drew a deep breath. "Is this all you have?"

He nodded. "If you need more while I'm gone, come with me and pick some up."

"I'd—rather you got them."

"I'll buy a carton," he said. "But first I'd better drain the pipes so we can leave as soon as I get back." He started for the cellar stairs.

"Wait a minute," she said. The stairs might be the very thing she was looking for. "Don't turn the water off yet. I may need it while you're gone."

"That makes sense," he agreed. "I'll do it when I get back."

As soon as she heard the car pull away, she rushed to the cellar door and flipped on the light. A flight of stone steps led down to the bottom. There was no handrail. But Harry had been up and down these stairs so many times he could probably maneuver them in the dark. Which—if she took care of the overhead bulb—was exactly the way he'd have to maneuver them. But she had something else in mind, something so brilliant that she wondered why she hadn't thought of it sooner.

Her gold bead necklace.

Removing it, she counted her beads. There were 43, all perfect polished spheres, small and smooth and slippery as a set of ballbearings. She went to the kitchen for a pair of scissors. Cutting the clasp

from the string, she made her way back to the stairs. On the landing, she got down on her hands and knees and, leaning over, deposited the beads on the first step, spreading them out from the center to the sides. Then, standing, she unscrewed the bulb. Shaking it until its filament snapped, she wondered what she would do if Harry, though badly injured, managed to survive his fall. Replacing the bulb, she decided that, if necessary, she would administer a few extra bumps to his head before collecting the beads and recovering the papers.

But what if Harry wanted to light his way with a flashlight? She took the only one she could find from the desk, removed the batteries, and soaked them in salt water before drying them off and putting them back. She flicked the flashlight switch. No more light. As for candles, she would have to leave them in the drawer so as not to alert him by their presence. But Harry's eyesight wasn't the best—even with a candle, he'd be unlikely to see the beads. Meanwhile she was dying for another cigarette. The only way she could do without one would be to sleep.

But how could she sleep now? She peered at her watch. Harry wouldn't be back for a half hour or more. Maybe she *should* take a nap. She had a long drive ahead of her, as well as tomorrow's trip to Florida. She made her way into the bedroom. Yes, she would lie down until Harry got back.

The bed had been stripped, and when she went to the linen cupboard there were no sheets or blankets. But she didn't mind. She lay down on the bare mattress and, wrapping her coat around her, closed her eyes.

When she awoke, the room was in semi-darkness, and very cold. She could feel it in the tingling of her cheeks, the near-numbness of her nose. She sat up and wriggled into her coat. Beneath the raised window shade she could see a light swirl of snow through the partly frosted windowpane and the gusting wind snapping at the pine trees beyond.

Where was Harry? She checked the time. It was more than an hour since he'd left. Darkness was closing in. With a muttered expletive, she sprang out of bed, found her shoes, and went into the front room, her breath misting.

Lighting a candle with nearly numb fingers, she made her way to

the fireplace. There were only two spindly half-charred logs and when she tried to ignite them with a burning newspaper they didn't catch. Could the damper be closed? She looked, but it was open. She grabbed one of Harry's Audubon magazines, set it afire, and tossed it into the fireplace. Then another and another. The last one did the job. Hovering next to the flames, she rubbed her bloodless hands together, silently castigating Harry for being late and the electric company for letting her freeze. But in one way, the lack of electricity was an advantage: Harry would have even less light to see with. As she waited for him, the logs flared up quickly, burned warmly for ten or fifteen nerve-wracking minutes, then died down into embers.

Harry definitely should have been back by now. His rental car was solidly built and had snow tires. Besides, the snow wasn't very deep. Even if the roads were unplowed driving shouldn't be a problem. How much longer could she risk turning into an icicle because Harry decided to drive at ten miles an hour?

Unless—and she had to face the possibility—he was toying with her for substituting Margaret's obit for her defaced picture. If so, there were ways to keep warm while she waited for him! She picked up one of the cherrywood dining chairs and swung it against the stone wall of the fireplace, smashing it until it shattered into a mass of splinters. Throwing the pieces into the fireplace, she began working on the three remaining chairs. While they were burning, she decided to make some coffee. But when she turned on the stove, the heatless coils bluntly reminded her that the electricity wasn't working. She slammed the copper kettle down so hard some icy water splashed out, spraying her on the face.

Oh, Judith thought, how she'd demolish the whole place for firewood if she could! Imagining the damage, it occurred to her that if she did burn any more furniture her plan would go up in smoke.

All right, the list of instructions. Now that she thought of it, there was a kerosene burner.

But where was it?

Setting a freshly lit candle into a holder, she searched the bedroom closet and the broom cabinet. No luck. The only place left was the cellar. But it was so dark down there. She considered waiting in her car with the motor running and the heat turned up, reminded herself that she'd only stopped once along the way for gas and didn't dare risk

using up what was left. No, she'd have to find the burner. Candle in hand, she hurried to the cellar door.

Carefully bypassing the first step, she made her way cautiously down the stairs. At the bottom, she hesitated for a few seconds, letting her eyes get accustomed to the somber shadows within range of the flickering light. Shivering, she drew up her collar. It was incredibly cold!

She found the burner in a small alcove directly under the stairs. Remembering the instructions, she checked the gauge to see if it had enough kerosene. It did. She picked the burner up in both arms, cradling it against her so that she could still hold the candle.

Going back up the steps, she paused near the top to deposit the burner on the landing before deftly leaping over the first step.

As she carried the burner into the front room, she realized that by putting all the beads on the same step, she hadn't taken full advantage of their lethal possibilities. Setting the burner on the hearth, she pondered a moment. If Harry was in a hurry to shut off the water, what would stop him from taking the steps two at a time and bypassing the one with the beads, just as she had?

Perhaps she should spread them around a bit more. She held her hands over the candle to warm them. She longed for a cigarette, but even if she had one she couldn't smoke it now. Harry might walk in at any second. She couldn't even afford the time to light the burner.

She hurried back to the steps. Placing the candle holder in the middle of the landing, she squatted down to retrieve a handful of beads and drop them into her pocket. Back on her feet, she bypassed the first step, and continued partway down.

Sitting on step number four, her feet straddling the one below, she arranged several beads in the space between her feet. Still in the same position, she eased herself onto the third step and repeated the process—as she did again on the second.

She surveyed her handiwork. That was more like it. As she reached back to hoist herself onto the landing, the motion of her arm knocked over the candle holder. Arching her body to grab it, she was thrown off balance and the flame extinguished itself against her palm.

Jerking her hand away with a shriek, she scrambled wildly about, trying to regain a sitting position. But as she did, her hands brushed against the uppermost beads, sending them tumbling down to where her scudding feet, unable to find a firm foothold, kept them furiously

in motion. Within seconds she was falling, falling, her ribs, shoulders, and knees hitting the hard stone steps until, stunned into semiconsciousness, she lay at the bottom.

When she tried to raise herself onto her elbows, the paralyzing pain in her back informed her that there was no way she could move. Tears burned her eyes but cooled rapidly against her frozen cheeks. Harry was supposed to be lying here, not she! Instead, very shortly, *he* would be rescuing *her*. Worse than being badly hurt, worse than the frightful darkness and increasing cold was the fact that by this stroke of luck Harry had managed to avert the death she had planned for him.

"The patient seems to be resting now, Dr. Williams."

"Well, that's an encouraging sign." The doctor studied a chart through his gold-rimmed glasses. "He certainly was agitated when they brought him here. Poor guy didn't even know he was having a heart attack. Any idea who he is, Miss Reilly?"

"He's from out of state." He told the ambulance attendant that he has a place in the country about twenty miles east. No phone. It's off the road near Covey's Pond."

"Did he say anything else?"

"He kept mumbling the name Margaret. Probably his wife."

The doctor made an entry on his chart. "I did notice that he was wearing a wedding ring. Assuming his wife is staying with him, we'll have to notify her, and the sooner the better. Maybe get the police to go over there and break the news to her. No doubt she's wondering what happened to him."

"I'm afraid not," said the nurse. "His wife is dead." She showed him the wallet-sized photo and the newspaper clipping. "Mr. Hammond had their wedding picture and her obituary clutched in his hand when the ambulance got to him."

"We'll have to try to get him not think about *anything*. Keep him heavily sedated."

"Yes, Doctor. I'm on extra duty tonight. One of the night nurses called to say that she couldn't make it. It's so cold outside that the locks on her car door are frozen."

"No wonder," said the doctor. "It's down to thirty below—hear the wind through these heavy concrete walls." He shook his head. "On a night like this, Miss Reilly, I'd give anything to be in Florida."

*Daybreak was devoted not only to a long life but to a merry one . . .*

# THE BLOOD TESTS

by

James  
Holding



I woke up with the grandfather of all hangovers.

It hurt just to open my eyes. After several attempts, I got them to stay open long enough to consult my wristwatch. Nine-thirty. Morning or evening? Sunlight through the slatted hotel blinds meant morning.

I groaned a couple of times, then rolled over on my bed as gingerly as a spelunker sleeping in the same cave with a snake. I got my feet on the floor, took a deep breath, and managed to stand up, my head

whirling and my stomach heaving. As rapidly as I could I hurried over to the dresser and poured down a couple of quick ounces of Johnny Walker Black to keep me alive long enough to get myself shaved and dressed.

I had an appointment with a doctor.

And a damn good thing too, I told myself. The shaving mirror showed me a sickening mixture of colors: dull Indian-black hair, light-blue eyes surrounded by bloodshot whites, skin the color of bleached oyster shells, pasty and too loose on the bones, a faint sheen of dirty violet from my beard. Definitely the face of an unhealthy man.

I knew exactly what my illness was, of course. Too much booze. But I'd set this appointment up with Dr. Jonathan Gaynor at The Long Life Clinic three days ago by telephone when I was comparatively sober. And I really wanted to consult him.

I drove to The Long Life Clinic in my rented Dodge Dart. The clinic turned out to be a compact one-storey building in a country setting just off the A-1-A north of Fort Lauderdale. It was painted a neutral ecru color which ought to match my skin, I thought, and had an ixora hedge lining the entrance walk whose red blossoms just about matched my bloodshot eyes. I had come to the right place, all right.

I parked in the parking lot and went in through the glass entrance doors. "Mr. Daybreak to see Doctor Gaynor," I told the girl at the reception desk.

She looked at her schedule and nodded. "Ten-fifteen," she said. Then, as they always do, she gave me a second look and opened her mouth to say something funny about my name, but didn't. I don't think Daybreak is such a funny name myself, of course, but then maybe I'm prejudiced. Anyway, anybody who wants to avoid it can call me Elihu. That's my first name—and a lot funnier than Daybreak, I think.

"If you'll have a seat, Mr. Daybreak," the receptionist said, "The Doctor will be with you in a few minutes." That's the way she said it—The Doctor, capitalized—and in the tone of voice Tibetans used to employ when referring to the Dalai Lama. I hoped the doctor turned out to be as good as she evidently thought he was.

Promptly at my designated time, I was shown into his office.

He didn't look like anything very special until you noticed his eyes. I liked his eyes, at least what I could see of them behind his lightly



tinted indoor-outdoor sunglasses. Their expression was warm, welcoming, interested, and extremely aware of me as he turned in his swivel chair to greet me. Yet at the same time, they seemed to be looking serenely through me and beyond me to some distant dream of perfect health that the rest of us don't ever see. As for the rest of him, he was developing a double chin and a plump waistline, although he couldn't have been much past forty. His hands were curiously undersized, as though a mistake had been made somewhere along the line and he'd come up with the hands of an eight-year-old. And he was so short that when he was seated, his feet barely reached the surface of his silver-and-rose Persian rug.

He rose to shake hands with me, then quickly sat down again, inviting me by a gesture to take the patient's chair beside his desk.

"What seems to be your trouble, Mr. Daybreak?" he asked gently, as though he didn't know just from looking at me.

"I won't beat around the bush, Doctor," I answered him. "I'm a drunk. And I need help."

He smiled at me, showing the small sharp teeth of the same eight-year-old he'd got his hands from. "You're a compulsive drinker? An alcoholic?"

"Look at me." I held out one hand. It was trembling like an aspen. "It's ten-fifteen in the morning and I've already knocked back five ounces of Scotch."

Dr. Gaynor nodded. "Alcoholics Anonymous or some similar organization would seem able to offer you more help than I could, Mr. Daybreak. Have you tried them?"

"Several times. Between drunks."

"No good?"

"None at all. I'd stop for a drink on my way home from the meetings."

Dr. Gaynor clicked his tongue.

"So I thought maybe you could do something for me," I said. "I've heard great things about your clinic. . . ."

"We could dry you out here, it's true, although I avoid cases like yours usually. Drying you out is only a temporary measure, as you know. And there are many less expensive methods than mine."

"Forget the expense," I said. "In what cases *do* you treat alcoholics?"

"When there seems some likelihood we can get at the underlying

causes of the illness. Alcoholism is an illness, Mr. Daybreak. Make no mistake about that."

"The only mistake I ever made about alcoholism was catching the disease in the first place. And as far as I know, the only underlying cause for it is a very strong liking for booze."

Dr. Gaynor shrugged his shoulders gently. "There are plenty of causative factors," he said. "Are you unhappily married?"

"Not married at all."

"Sexually frustrated then?"

"Not in the least."

"Heavy pressure from your work? A psychological need to escape from the demands of your job?"

I shook my head. "I don't work for a living, Doctor. I play for a living."

"Play?"

"I'm into gambling of one kind and another, and if I do say so myself I'm pretty good at it as well as pretty lucky. Horses, poker, bridge, gin-rummy, the numbers, professional sports—you name it—and I've usually got a few dollars going on it." I grinned at him. "Anyway, no business pressures."

"Then perhaps there's a physical cause," said Dr. Gaynor quietly. "Something wrong with your physical machine that needs repair. Something you may be completely unaware of that induces mild depression and anxiety, and leads to your overindulgence in drink."

"Could you fix me up if something like that is causing me to stay oiled day in and day out? Some physical cause?"

The doctor nodded benignly. "Of course," he said, "if the cause can be isolated and cured. But before we could possibly begin to investigate that, we'd have to dry you out. Which would take several days at least, judging from your—ah—present condition."

"Cold turkey?" I shivered. "Well—" I paused, reluctant. "O.K."

He eyed me speculatively for a moment as though he were trying to come to a decision. I'd seen that look before, mostly on the faces of gamblers tempted to draw to a four-card straight. Dr. Gaynor said, "All right, Mr. Daybreak, if you can afford the time and money. And if you can stand abstinence long enough to let us run some blood tests on you when your blood is not adulterated by alcohol."

"I'm willing to take a crack at it if you are," I said. "I'm not asking

for any guaranteed cure, understand, only for all the help you can give me."

He nodded and tapped his right shoe on the Persian rug. Then he stood up. "I'll want you admitted at once," he said. "Are you a local resident, may I ask?"

"Just a winter visitor from up north," I answered truthfully. "I can check out of my hotel and be back in an hour."

"Good. Miss Halborn, our receptionist, will have instructions to admit you as a patient when you return." His eyes were fixed on that far point again but he did try a small final pleasantry. "Are you feeling able to drive safely, Mr. Daybreak? I wouldn't want to lose a new patient to the police on a DWI charge."

"Don't worry," I said. "With the practice I've had, I could drive a fire engine safely while plastered to the eyes."

So, two hours later I was back in bed again. Only this time it was in Dr. Gaynor's Long Life Clinic instead of at the Escape Hotel. I still felt as rotten as I had earlier, but I didn't have any friendly bottle of Johnny Walker Black on my dresser to take the edge off my misery. Miss Halborn, the receptionist, had detected it in my suitcase when she showed me to my room (semi-private) and hung up my clothes for me, and had, in the deprecatory manner of a mother removing a baby rabbit from her small son's pocket, appropriated it.

After I'd settled in bed and established that my roommate on the other side of the dividing curtain was (a) asleep, (b) unconscious, or (c) dead, since he didn't answer my polite greetings, I stared at the row of paperback suspense stories I'd brought along to while away the hours. Now that I was here, I wasn't sure about the wisdom of my decision to come.

I was glooming at the cheerfully tinted ceiling of my room when a starchy rustle beside me, and a faint whiff of Lilies of the Valley, told me that a new factor had entered my case. The new factor was a gorgeous long-legged apparition in a nurse's uniform. She must be an apparition, I reasoned, because they just weren't turning out girls like that any more, at least in the circles I moved in. Her nurse's cap was perched on a mop of red-gold hair that given half a chance might have rivaled Rapunzel's, if Rapunzel is the girl I mean. Her nose had an insolent tilt to it, and even an alcoholic could plainly see that under her

uniform she was built clear out to here. The Lilies of the Valley smell came from her; she was wearing perfume in defiance, I found out later, of the clinic rules. In any event, the mere sight of her instantly made my stay at The Long Life Clinic something to be looked forward to with pleasure rather than regret.

"I'm-Constance Perry," she introduced herself. "Dr. Gaynor tells me I'm to keep an eye on you for the next few days."

For the first time in quite a while, I felt slightly embarrassed. "Don't come any closer, Nurse," I quipped, "to the human sponge. I'm soaked in booze and unfit for human contact—especially with Aphrodite or Venus or whoever you are."

"Come off it, Buster," said Aphrodite, "you're not that smashed. You can call me Miss Perry."

"What a relief," I said.

"Relief?"

"That you're not Mrs. Perry. You don't know what that knowledge does for me."

"It better keep you off booze without screaming if you don't want me in here with a strait-jacket," she said firmly, shoving a thermometer in my mouth. "That's quicksilver in there," she said, "so don't try to drink it."

Full of wise saws and modern instances; but I couldn't have cared less. Around the thermometer I said, "You're breathtaking, Miss Perry."

She sniffed up that tilted nose. "Even Scope couldn't take your breath," she said, "so kindly shut up." She took my wrist in her fingers and counted my pulse. It was an oddly exciting experience for me. Her touch was cool and impersonal. Her nails were trimmed round and short, unpolished.

I said, "You haven't worked here very long, have you?"

She gave me a sharp look out of her big green eyes. "What makes you think that?"

"You haven't learned yet how to be patient with a patient, that's why. Even with a poor sodden alcoholic."

"You're acting pretty chipper for a poor sodden alcoholic."

"That's because you stimulate me, Miss Perry. Even more than Johnny Walker Black. And that's no paltry stimulation, let me tell you."

She smiled for the first time. "I sometimes have that effect on drunks and children, Mr. Daybreak. But that doesn't mean you can wheedle a drink out of me. I'm all the stimulation you're going to get for a few days."

"I'll certainly settle for you if I have to. Yet if you look at this thing objectively, there's no good reason why you couldn't sneak me a couple of those small sample bottles of Scotch, is there? They're very tiny, easily concealed in the décolletage . . ."

"Mercy, what big words you use!" she said.

"How about it, Miss Perry? The little bottles?"

"You seem to need one-word answers. So here's one. No."

"Negative, as I feared. Can't you think positively, Miss Perry?"

"O.K. I'm positively not smuggling in any booze for you." She was marking things down on a chart that hung on the foot of my bed. "But I *will* give you something that may help."

"What?" I asked.

"This," she said. She took a couple of rolls of candy peppermints from her pocket and handed them to me. "Take one, Dr. Gaynor suggests, when you think you can't stand it for another minute without a drink." She showed me a set of Deborah Kerr teeth in a smile totally lacking in sympathy.

I was indignant. "For candy mints I pay The Long Life Clinic a hundred dollars a day?"

"A hundred and fifty," she said. "Semi-private. Our private rooms are two ten."

"Well," I said, "if I'm going to fight off Ole Debbil Rum with candy mints, I'd rather do it standing up than nailed to this bed. Am I allowed to get up?"

"Certainly. To go to the bathroom. Or walk in the corridor. Or sit in your armchair. Anything except take a drink or disturb our other patients."

"Does that include talking to my roommate on the other side of this curtain?"

"Of course."

"Then you'd better take a look at him on your way out."

"Why?"

"I think he may be dead."

"He's asleep, Mr. Daybreak. Slightly sedated, as it happens. He had

his injection just before you checked in."

"What's wrong with him? Is he a drunk too?"

"Why don't you ask him," she suggested, "after he wakes up?" She turned on her heel and left me. I admired the way she moved—like a silky lady leopard who knows she can beat the daylights out of anything she's likely to meet at the waterhole.

In an hour or so, my headache and queasiness settled down to a dull bearable misery. I closed my eyes and dropped into a doze. The clatter of metal trays in the corridor awoke me.

Lunchtime. I groaned aloud at the thought.

A voice from the other side of the curtain called out cheerily, "Don't give up hope there, buddy. The chow isn't all that bad."

"Thanks," I answered feebly, "I'm glad to hear you say so. I thought you were dead."

"Far from it, pal, far from it." A head appeared around the edge of the curtain. It was a tousled head, presenting a broken nose, bat ears, pig eyes, and a yellow-toothed grin as its main features—the grin a bit one-sided since the man's face was badly twisted on one side. "I was just taking a little nap after my injection. Who are you?"

"Daybreak," I said. "Elihu Daybreak."

His half grin widened. "I mean your real name."

"That's it. What's yours?"

"Smith. Spelled the regular way."

"Oh," I said. No wonder he resented my name. "What are you in for? You look as healthy as a Geritol commercial."

Smith pushed the curtain between us back, then returned to the armchair in which he had been sitting at the foot of his bed. "All that's wrong with me is a slight case of Bell's palsy . . ." he began, then broke off as Nurse Constance Perry carried his luncheon tray into the room. His little pig eyes devoured her.

I was watching her too. In fact, the sight of her made me suddenly confident that I could drink a glass of milk if she brought it to me. Holding it down afterward was another matter, but it wouldn't hurt to try. At a hundred and a half a day, I ought to get at least a glass of milk for my money, even if it was wasted on my Scotch-oriented stomach.

As Miss Perry put down Smith's tray I said, "I think I could manage a glass of milk, Nurse, if you don't mind."

She flashed me a look. "Well, well! You tired of candy mints already?"

By an effort of will I kept from heaving and replied with dignity, "I would like a glass of milk, please, Nurse."

She nodded. "All right. But don't expect any brandy in it." She turned to Smith and explained kindly, "Mr. Daybreak is a drunk. Don't let him near your rubbing alcohol."

"Is that what it is with him?"

Defensively I said, "It's no worse than Bell's palsy, for God's sake!"

The nurse held up her hand. "No quarreling over diseases, fellows. I'll get the milk for you, Mr. Daybreak. Then perhaps you can handle a full tray by dinnertime."

She brought the milk and put it on my bedside table and went out again, moving every bit as leopardly as before. I whistled a low note of appreciation.

"Isn't she something else?" Smith said. "She won't last a week here, though, I guarantee you! She's only been here four days and already the guy in Room 7 has tried twice to prove he's cured. And he's only had three injections."

"Cured?"

"Yeah. Of impotence. That's what he's being treated for, he told me."

"Who told you he tried to practice on Miss Perry?"

"She did. When she thought I was getting similar ideas."

"Were you?" Foolish question.

Smith's laugh was candid. "Who wouldn't? She's a dish."

"And you with Bell's palsy," I reproved him. "You ought to be ashamed." I paused. "What's Bell's palsy?"

"Nerve condition. That's what's wrong with my face."

I looked at him and thought, That's just one thing that's wrong with your face, pal. Out loud I said, "And they're giving you shots for it?" I lingered over the word "shots." It's a lovely word.

"Yeah. Doc Gaynor's fixing me up. Gives me a blood test every week and the reports show I'm getting better."

"How many shots have you had so far?"

"I been here four weeks. Two shots a week. Eight shots."

"They check on your palsy from your blood tests?"

"Sure. They feed my blood-test results into a computer at the

laboratory, Doc Gaynor says, and the computer gives them the score on how I'm doing."

"How many shots you going to need?"

"About twenty, Doc figures. I hope that's all. They run into important money."

"How much?" I asked curiously.

"A thousand bucks for a series of ten."

I whistled.

"And the cost of the room and blood tests on top of that."

"What's the stuff they shoot you with? Liquid gold?"

Smith shrugged. "How do I know? Whatever they give you for Bell's palsy."

I took a sip of the milk and watched Smith demolish his luncheon. "I'm a drunk, you've got Bell's palsy, and the guy in Room 7 is impotent. Some mixture."

"Doc Gaynor'll take anybody as a patient in the clinic as long as he thinks he can help them," Smith said. "Man across the hall, his blood tests show he's got multiple sclerosis. And there's a girl in Room 6 with some kind of asthma, I think. Gaynor's shots are working wonders for them, I hear. But what the clinic is mainly for is to put guys back on the track that can't make it any more in the romance department, know what I mean? Like the guy in 7. Rejuvenation. That's why Doc originally called the joint The Long Life Clinic. See?" He winked at me.

I downed the last half ounce of milk in my glass. "Whoo!" I said. "To think they force this stuff on helpless little children!" Surprisingly, the milk stayed down. I threw back the bedcovers, slid into my robe and slippers, and made for the door. "I think I'll go for a little stroll," I said to Smith. "I can't wait to swap stories with the guy in number 7."

The Long Life Clinic, I discovered, was much smaller than it looked from outside. As far as I could see, there were only fifteen rooms for patients spaced along the clinic's wide corridor. Twenty-five patients, tops, I figured, if five of the rooms were singles. Some of the doors stood open, revealing empty beds. Doc Gaynor's business wasn't operating at full capacity, it seemed. Not surprising at his prices, I thought.

Miss Perry sat in the nurse's station at the back of the corridor,



doing some kind of paperwork. The swinging doors behind her, I guessed, must lead to the clinic's service area—the kitchen, staff dining room, business office, and maybe offices for other staff doctors, if there were any. She looked up from her work as I shuffled down the corridor toward her and said, "What do you want?"

"You said it was O.K. to go to the bathroom."

"Not out here in the corridor," she answered tartly. "Are you feeling better?"

"Some," I said. "When will I get my blood tests?"

"Blood tests for what? You're an alcoholic, period."

"Dr. Gaynor wants to check me out for underlying causes," I said. "So when?"

"It shouldn't be too long. If you kept that glass of milk down just now, you're obviously a fast healer. But Dr. Gaynor will decide."

"Another thing that bothers me, Miss Perry, is that from what I hear, everybody in the place is getting injections. No matter what's wrong with them. And every so often everybody has to supply blood samples for some computer to analyze."

Miss Perry put down her pencil. "You don't like blood tests?"

"They're O.K., sure. But every week?"

"Why not?"

"Because that's one reason I started drinking. I turn absolutely chicken at the sight of a hypodermic needle!"

"Too bad, Mr. Daybreak." She was glacially unsympathetic. "You came here voluntarily, didn't you?"

"Sure. But I didn't know about the specialty of the house." I paused. "You wouldn't want to take some blood out of my arm now, would you?" I leered at her.

"You can't run a blood test on tincture of alcohol. Just be patient."

"I'll bet you tell that to all the boys. Especially the guy in Room 7."

"I'll have to call Dr. Gaynor unless you return to your room, Mr. Daybreak." Her voice reminded me of the shaved ice under the dead trout at the fish market.

I shuffled back to my room and started on a paperback called *Gory Glory*.

Three boring days crept by. I was visited twice a day by Dr. Gaynor, who checked my drying-out process. I was visited three times a day by Nurse Perry, who brought trays of quite acceptable food to

my roommate and me. I read. I walked the hall. I did sit-ups on the floor of my room. I tried without success to make a friend of Miss Perry.

On the third day, Doc Gaynor came in just before noon and shot a hypo full of something greenish-white into my roommate's hip and made him swallow a pill of some kind immediately after. The pill was intended to throw Smith into the same kind of sedated sleep he'd enjoyed the first day I arrived at the clinic. After Gaynor left and before Smith got too doped to answer, I said, "Does Doc Gaynor always give you those shots himself?"

"Yep. Doesn't trust anybody else to do it right."

"Wish he'd make an exception when it comes to me and let Nurse Perry do it."

Smith grinned. "Where you think you are?" he asked drowsily. "A massage parlor?"

On the fourth day, Doc Gaynor made the big decision to run his first blood test on me and sent Constance Perry in to bleed me. While she fussed with her glass tubes and slides, I said, "When will I learn what I've got? I mean, besides a drinking problem and peppermint-candy poisoning?"

"When Dr. Gaynor gets the report on this blood."

"When'll that be?"

"Four or five days."

"What? Four or five days? Just to run blood samples through a laboratory?"

"The laboratory's in Key West."

"Great! So I'm at the mercy of the postal service, is that it?"

"That's it." She started packing up her kit.

"In that case, I could die before the report comes back."

She said unfeelingly, "Try not to," and left me.

Four or five days! While I frittered away a hundred and fifty skins a day in The Long Life Clinic? I thought about that. And about how superbores I'd be by then. And about the syringe-ful of stuff Doc Gaynor had shot into Smith's hip. And about an ice-cold straight-up martini with a twist. And I followed Nurse Perry out into the corridor and through the swinging doors into the service area behind the nurse's station. Miss Perry turned through a doorway on the right into what seemed to be a business office—the place was full of filing

cabinets anyway.

Through a large plate-glass panel that fronted the corridor I saw two girls at typewriter desks. I drew closer to the open door. Miss Perry handled my blood samples to one of the girls. "These are for Daybreak, Room 4," she said. "Alcoholic."

The girl nodded indifferently, made a note, and slid the slides and tubules of my blood into a cotton-lined box already addressed and stamped for mailing. I went into the room just as Nurse Perry turned to leave it. She stared at me. "What are you doing in here, Daybreak?" she said sharply. "This is off limits for patients."

"I didn't know that. Excuse me." I glanced over her shoulder at the mailing box with my blood samples in it, still lying on the secretary's desk. It was addressed to Consultants, Inc., P.O. Box 810, Key West, Florida. "I was hoping to find Dr. Gaynor."

"His office is up front," Perry snapped. I followed her meekly out of the business office and back through the swinging doors to the corridor. "What do you want with Dr. Gaynor?"

"I'll tell *him* that, if you don't mind," I said with dignity.

The receptionist, up front, told Dr. Gaynor I would like to see him. He was free and said to send me in. "Hello there, Mr. Daybreak," he greeted me. "How goes it?"

"Fine, Doctor. But I have a question."

His eyes narrowed a little. "Yes?"

"Do I have to stay at the clinic until my blood-test results come back? They tell me it'll be four or five days. What's my chance of being an out-patient until then?"

"You want to leave us? Why?"

"Not to start drinking again, Doctor," I said earnestly. "I'm dry as a bone now and I want to stay that way with your help. But I won't fool you. It's partly the room rate here and partly because I've got something coming up outside that needs my personal attention."

"Like what?" The doctor squinted at me.

I said, "Like a no-limit poker game in Miami, Doctor. What do you say?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Why not? You would be safer from any lapse if you stayed here, of course, but we *have* wrung you out enough to get the necessary blood tests. So it's entirely up to you. Suppose I call you when your report comes in and you can make an appointment

to see me then? Depending upon what the tests show, we'll decide on treatment for you then." He smiled at me disarmingly. "Meanwhile, you'll give us a check for services already rendered?"

"Naturally," I said. "And thanks, Doctor."

I went back to my room, got dressed, and packed my few belongings into the suitcase I'd brought with me. My roommate, Smith, watched me from his chair. I tipped a hand to him and said, "See you later, hey? I'm temporarily an out-patient now." He merely nodded. I thought I saw a gleam of pity in his eye. Poor miserable drunk, he was probably thinking, can't even wait for his blood-test results. I didn't see a sign of Miss Constance Perry as I left.

I took a cab to the Escape Hotel where I'd left my rental Dodge in the parking lot. I tossed my suitcase into the back seat, got into the car, and headed for Miami.

I avoided the worst of the city traffic by taking Route 27 around it. At Homestead I stopped for gas and had my tires checked before I headed on down Route 1 to the Overseas Highway.

I was in Key West by five o'clock. I stopped at the Holiday Inn on the east side of town and asked for a second-floor waterside room. It was a pleasant change after my semi-private at The Long Life Clinic. I threw my suitcase on the bed and went out on my balcony to refresh my flagging spirits with a look at the Gulf. The balcony actually overhung the water. On the balcony next to mine, a blonde houri in a bikini was fishing over the balcony rail. I forgot about the Gulf. The blonde was far more refreshing.

I felt curiously relaxed. When I got tired of watching the fisherwoman next door, I went into my room and took a nap until dinnertime. Then I went down to the dining room and had two ice-cold, very dry martinis straight up. They were indescribably delicious. I wanted a third, but denied myself out of respect for Dr. Gaynor, Nurse Perry, and The Long Life Clinic.

Thereafter I dined sumptuously on turtle steak and french fries, with a dollop of tossed salad with oil and vinegar on the side. I had a snifter of Hennessy Five Star for dessert, telling myself, to ease my conscience, that after a hundred and fifty a day at the Clinic, my expense sheet for the Holiday Inn at Key West would be peanuts.

When I returned to my room after dinner, it was full dark. The stars were twinkling over the Gulf and a new moon, as slender and fragile as

a fingernail clipping, was rising. Night-blooming jasmine scented the air. Time to get back to work, I told myself. I got out the Key West telephone directory and looked up Consultants, Inc., first in the regular listings, then in the Yellow Pages.

It wasn't listed in either place. So I watched a documentary on the evils of strip mining and went to bed.

The next morning early, aided by a free map of the city, I located the post office on Caroline Street. I parked my car on a vacant slot nearby, and when the post office opened for business I was the first one in. A solid wall of rental boxes was the first thing that met my eye. I hustled toward them as though I could hardly wait to see if I had any mail that morning, and found Box 810 in the fourth row from the bottom in the middle. I stepped over and looked through the glass front of Box 810. There were two small packages inside addressed to Consultants, Inc. The Long Life Clinic had mailed my blood samples in a box exactly like them yesterday.

I straightened up, half tempted to stop at one of the post office windows and inquire straightforwardly about the holder of Box 810. Then I decided to do it the hard way. Any laboratory worth its salt would surely pick up its mail every day. Right?

I went outside to the sidewalk and looked around. Directly across the street was a shell shop. I strolled over and inspected the window display briefly before turning my head to look back across at the post office. As I hoped, the rows of boxes were clearly visible from where I stood.

By the end of an hour, I was damned tired of looking in that shell shop window. Tired of false alarms too—people going into the post office to collect mail from the boxes but nobody going near number 810. Along about ten-thirty, however, a short foreign-looking lad with a ragged brown beard loafed into view, fumbling in his faded jeans pocket for a key as he approached the post office. And when he went in and approached the boxes, his body blocked off my view of number 810. I took that for a good sign.

When he came out again I was leaning against the wall beside the post office entrance, looking at my free city map like any tourist. He had collected his mail and it was still in his hand—the two small packages from Box 810.

I folded up my map as he turned the corner into Elizabeth Street

and went after him. At the corner, I looked down Elizabeth and saw him ambling along the sidewalk half a block away. Heading for a parked car? If so, I couldn't do anything about it. My own car was two blocks behind me now. I'd lose him if I turned back for it.

He walked on, in no hurry to get to his car if he had one. I kept half a block behind him. There were plenty of pedestrians on the sidewalks to shield me from his possible observation. All the same, I made myself as inconspicuous as possible.

At Truman Avenue, he turned left and kept going. Still no car. I turned left too, and dawdled along behind him, keeping my distance. At Roosevelt, he went straight ahead along the boulevard. So did I, beginning to wonder where he was aiming for.

He didn't keep me guessing much longer. When he came to the deep-sea-fishing docks, which ran along the edge of Roosevelt Boulevard, he turned in and momentarily disappeared from my view. I put on speed and soon caught sight of him again. He was just stepping down onto the deck of a beat-up charter boat with the name *Laughing Gull* lettered across the stern.

The *Laughing Gull* was a boat that not even a half-blind fisherman would have selected to take him deep-sea fishing. She looked as though her mooring lines were all that kept her from sinking at the dock. She was berthed in the last slip at the far end of the dock. The three slips this side of her were empty.

Well, I'll admit that I don't know very much about medical laboratories, but I was pretty certain this decrepit fishing boat wasn't one. Especially one reported to have a specially programmed computer to analyze blood-test results. So I expected to hear the lad in the beard start up *Laughing Gull's* motor and take off with his recently collected blood samples for wherever the laboratory of Consultants, Inc. was.

I drifted on up the sidewalk until I was even with *Laughing Gull's* slip. There I hung fire for a few minutes, unfolding my map again and pretending to study it while I sneaked a look into the fishing boat's cockpit. With the sun in my eyes, it was too dark in there for me to see anything.

No motor started up. No sign of the bearded man. I was relieved, in a way, because I certainly couldn't follow the boat if she took off anywhere. Yet I wasn't sure just how to proceed if she didn't take off.

Finally I figured the only approach was the bold one. I put away my

map, scrambled over the low retaining wall between the sidewalk and the dock, and approached the stern of *Laughing Gull*. I knocked on her combing with my knuckles and called out, "Hey! *Laughing Gull*! Anybody home?"

I leaned forward and peered into the cabin. From this close, I could see the bearded man. He was lying in one of the boat's two ratty bunks on a moth-eaten cushion, holding a can of beer in one hand. Tired out probably, I thought, by his strenuous trip to the post office.

He didn't move at my hail. But he did unbend enough to answer, "What do you want?"

I told him the truth. "I'm looking for a medical laboratory called Consultants, Inc.," I said.

There was a moment of silence. Then, "I never heard of it, mister. So get lost, O.K.?" Faint foreign accent. Cuban, maybe. He stirred in the bunk. "Does this look like a medical laboratory, for God's sake?"

"No. But I was told you could help me find Consultants, Inc."

"Who told you that?" He took a swig of beer.

"A clerk at the Key West post office," I answered. "The only address I have for Consultants, Inc. is a box number there, and they told me at the post office that you were assigned that number."

"What number is that?"

"Eight ten."

He laughed. "You better come aboard, mister, till we straighten this out. Somebody's been putting you on, that's for sure." He made no effort to get out of the bunk.

I stepped down to *Laughing Gull*'s deck and picked my way between dilapidated fishing chairs under the overhang to the cabin companionway. I paused at the top of the three steps to the cabin. It was nice to get out of the hot sun.

"Did this clown at the post office happen to tell you my name too?" my host wanted to know.

"No. Just that you had this fishing boat, *Laughing Gull*, at the charter boat dock." How stupid can you get? I asked myself too late. He'll never believe a fairy tale like that. I wouldn't myself.

He didn't. I saw his teeth through his ragged beard as he smiled. He didn't say anything, just finished his beer and tossed the can into a corner of the filthy cabin. Then he started to climb out of the bunk.

At the same moment, I felt the deck under my feet dip sharply and

heard the scuffle of rubber soles as somebody came aboard behind me.

I started to turn, but not fast enough. I don't know what he hit me with, but whatever it was, it tumbled me down the companionway of *Laughing Gull* into a pit of darkness.

When I came to, I was curled up on my side in the same bunk where my bearded friend had lately lain. Only I didn't have a can of beer in my hand. I was sorry about that, because my mouth felt as dry as kapok. Not that it would have helped any if I'd *had* a beer, because my mouth, I discovered, was taped shut. To keep beer out and yells for help in? Anyway, I didn't seem to have any hands with which to hold a can of beer. I considered this odd fact solemnly until at last, between pulsations of the pounding headache I had, I realized fuzzily that my hands were tied behind my back.

Reflexively, I began to squirm in the bunk but instantly froze again at the sound of a voice that reached me from the fishing deck a few feet behind my aching head. The voice belonged to the man with the beard and the accent. It was saying, "We can't take a chance, Jerry. We can't."

Another voice, a deep rumbling bass. No question about its accent. Florida cracker. It said, "I'm trying to figure the best way out of this, Pete, the same as you. And seems to me the easiest thing is to take him out and tie some weights to him and drop him over."

They were talking about me. Drop me over? I was shocked by the idea. No, what I was, to be honest, was scared to death. I strained my ears for Pete's reply. He said, "That's too dangerous. The guy knows too much about us to take any chances with him."

"What's he know? He knows that we're Consultants, Inc., right? And that the *Laughing Gull* is a hell of a funny-looking laboratory." Jerry chuckled. "And he had to follow you home from the post office to find out that much. I couldn't believe it at first, Pete, that he was really on your tail. He kept looking at a map all the time."

"Our security system worked just fine today," Pete said complacently. My raging headache confirmed that beyond question.

"Yeah," Jerry said. "When you asked him to come aboard, I knew he was bad news. Now I think we should finish the job."

"Drop him in the Gulf?"

"Right."



"No way," said Pete. I breathed a muffled sigh of relief. Pete seemed to be the boss. "What if somebody else knows what he knows? Whatever it is? What if *he* has a security system too, with a back-up man out there who's right now figuring what he should do about *us*?"

"Well . . ."

"We move too quick on this, Jerry, we could blow our whole sweet setup. We don't want to do that."

"No, I guess not," Jerry conceded. "We'd never find another pigeon like Doc, that's for sure." A pause. Then, "You don't think *Doc* sent this guy down here, do you?"

"Doc? Why would he do a stupid thing like that?"

"Maybe to save himself a couple a hundred a week."

"Peanuts. Doc don't even miss what he pays us. And don't forget Doc dreamed this whole idea up himself."

"He'd like to get rid of us all the same, Pete, and you know it."

"And take a chance we'd blow the whistle on him? Nuts. He's really a doctor, Jerry, you got to remember that—he wants to make people *well*, not harm them. Not even us. Why else do you think he's willing to keep paying us off?"

"Then what should we do about this guy in the cabin?"

"Call Doc and let him decide. That's the smart thing."

A moment of silence. My head thumped like a woodpecker's bill on pecky cypress. Stubbornly Jerry said, "Why bother Doc? I still say we ought to handle it ourselves."

Again Pete saved me, temporarily at least, from his bloodthirsty colleague. "What if he's a cop?" he asked. "Seems funny he don't have any credit cards or anything on him to tell who he is. Not even a driver's license." I thanked my stars I'd left all my papers in the glove compartment of the Dodge.

"So he's a cop. So what?" Jerry laughed. "Just as hard for cops to breathe underwater as anybody else."

"Will you stop with that?" Pete snapped. "You could of killed the guy already with that crack you laid on him."

"I just tapped him," Jerry replied cheerfully. "No damage."

"Go see if he's come to," Pete directed. "I'm going to call Doc. He'll know how to handle it."

The *Laughing Gull* dipped as Pete jumped ashore. Jerry stuck his head down the companionway to take a look at me. Through almost

closed eyelids, I saw a square, thick-lipped brutal face with heavy sun-bleached eyebrows. I let my eyes flutter open and tried a groan through the adhesive tape sealing my mouth. I didn't have to try very hard to make the groan sound realistic.

Jerry came down into the cabin and poked a finger like a dollar cigar into the pit of my stomach. "You awake?" he asked pleasantly. He poked me again, harder. I fought to keep from throwing up. He knew as well as I did that it would strangle me to death with my mouth taped shut. I sent him frantic pleas with my eyes to lay off. He laughed and kept on poking. A little harder each time.

Then the boat dipped and Pete came back aboard. He must have called from the charter-dock pay booth, because he'd been gone no more than five minutes.

Jerry shrugged and winked at me and turned toward Pete as he came down into the cabin. "What did Doc say?" he asked.

Pete looked at the color of my face and the cold sweat on my skin and sensed what his playful partner had been up to. He threw an angry look at Jerry, who ignored it. "What did Doc say?" Jerry repeated.

Pete elbowed him away from my bunk and took hold of my left arm before he answered. "This," he said.

I felt a sharp prick in my arm and squirmed helplessly. Jerry started to say something, and Pete said, "Shut up!" He pulled the needle out of my arm and they both left the cabin. I could hear the old fishing chairs squeak when the two resumed their seats out on the fishing deck. After a few minutes I smelled cigarette smoke, but there was no more talk between them, at least none that I could hear. Soon things began to get vague and fuzzy in the cabin. I felt dizzy. And then I didn't feel anything.

My next awakening was far more satisfactory than the first. My headache was less intense. My lips were free of the adhesive. My hands were no longer tied behind me. My head was pillowed on fresh white percale. And I was lying full length in a comfortable bed.

I turned my head on the pillow, and there, sitting quietly in an armchair beside my bed and watching me with a faint smile on his lips, was Dr. Jonathan Gaynor.

I was back in The Long Life Clinic. Private room, this time. No

roommate with Bell's palsy. Just little old Doc Gaynor in the room with me. Doc Gaynor who was queer for blood tests.

He saw I was conscious and said without preamble, "What have you been up to, Mr. Daybreak?"

I gave it right back to him. "What have *you* been up to, Dr. Gaynor?"

"I thought I was treating you for alcoholism. It seems I wasn't successful. You were found wandering around Key West dead drunk, and asked to be brought back here. So here you are. And you owe the two gentlemen who brought you back some mileage money and a vote of thanks, I should say."

"I won't forget their kindness," I said, feeling my head tenderly. "I promise you that."

Dr. Gaynor said, "Why did you leave here, Mr. Daybreak?"

"You know the answer to that, Doctor. I told you I'm a gambler, remember? It's very simple—I wanted a piece of your action."

"Oh." In some odd way, Doc Gaynor seemed relieved. "*My* action. But you told me you were leaving to participate in a poker game in Miami."

"Well, I decided to try Key West instead."

"Why Key West?"

"Oh, come on, Doc," I said wearily, "I'm not a moron. When my roommate in this crazy clinic tells me he's got Bell's palsy and that you're following its progress through weekly blood tests, I began to smell action. It stuck out a mile. You can't tell anything about Bell's palsy from blood tests!"

He sent me a severe and disapproving stare, as though he were a professor whose star pupil has just given him a wrong answer. "Are you a physician, Mr. Daybreak?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then . . ."

"I know enough not to buy those blood tests of yours as kosher. Not when you use them to check out multiple sclerosis *and* sexual impotence. Even asthma."

Dr. Gaynor asked curiously, as though he didn't really know the answer, "What led you to Key West?"

"Consultants, Inc. I saw my blood samples being mailed to them in Key West." I laughed, although it hurt my head. "That's some labora-

tory you've got down there, Doc. When I found *Laughing Gull* I knew you had some kind of action going." I gave him a straight look and paused significantly. "I want to get in on it, Doc. Whatever you've got going."

Gaynor said slowly, "If you care for blackmail, I suppose you can get in on it."

I pretended surprise. "Blackmail? Is that what Consultants, Inc. is all about?"

"What else?" For a moment he looked fierce. Then, abandoning all pretense, he said bitterly, "Those two leeches in Key West couldn't even manage a traffic count, let alone a blood count."

His bitterness seemed genuine. I said, "Where are those two leeches right now?"

"Outside in the corridor."

"Waiting to see if I'm going to live or die? Or to make sure I don't cause a disturbance?"

He ignored that. I said, "The blood tests by mail order are a complete fraud?"

"Of course." He peered at me through his sunglasses. "As you so cleverly remarked just now, you can't tell much about Bell's palsy from a blood test." Then, with a touch of malice, "On the other hand, Mr. Daybreak, *your* illness—alcoholism—can frequently be detected by blood test. Liver damage is quite accurately indicated by the SMAC 23 Profile."

"Well, well," I said, "do you also fake *reports* of the blood tests Pete and Jerry are supposedly running for you?"

"Naturally. I must have something on record in the patients' files to justify the treatments I'm giving them."

I grinned at him. This was quite a gimmick. "So you forge the reports personally? On official Consultants, Inc. report forms?"

He nodded and gave me his faint smile. "So are the invoices we get each month from Consultants, Inc."

"Invoices? You actually get monthly bills for blackmail?"

"Sending Pete and Jerry the blood samples is merely a convenient method of concealing my blackmail payments from my staff and the accountants. At the end of each month, Consultants, Inc. bills The Long Life Clinic fifty dollars for each blood test they have supposedly run on the samples I've sent. And I pass the cost along to my patients here."

"Nice little operation," I said. "Your patients pay your blackmail for you. Don't any of them ever get suspicious?"

"You aren't painfully or dangerously or hopelessly ill. If you were, you'd be as trusting and grateful as the rest of my patients. You'd believe in anything or anybody that indicated you were getting well. You must remember, Mr. Daybreak, that to the average patient here, a blood test, especially one that has reportedly issued from a computer, is as mysterious and incomprehensible as the guidance system of an ICBM."

I took a deep breath and asked him the big question. "What do Jerry and Pete have on you, Doc?"

"There's no need for you to know that." His expression was, curiously, one of injured innocence, not guilt. "I will agree to add you to the staff of Consultants, Inc."—the faint smile again—"if you merely keep quiet about the false blood tests. I'll have to increase the number I process, of course, to supply you an equal share of blackmail money. In any event, you shall have a nice little supplement to your gambling winnings." He sighed and brushed back a lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead. Then he added wryly, "I suppose from now on I'll be in constant fear that sometime in your cups you'll reveal our little secret. At least, I haven't had that trouble with Pete and Jerry."

I didn't say anything for a minute. My Key West trip hadn't been a total waste of time, after all. It had given me a lever with which to pry out of Gaynor what I really wanted to know. "Listen, Doc," I said, "I don't want any part of the blood-test operation. I'd as soon go partners with a couple of coral snakes as Jerry and Pete. Know what I mean?"

He waited for me to go on. When I didn't, he asked, "If not that way, what do you want?"

"I want something entirely different from you for keeping mum about the blood tests. Not money."

He was skeptical. "Not money?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Information," I said.

He licked his lips. "What kind of information?"

"Medical. Like about the injections you give your patients for what ails them." I kept a sharp eye on his face. It didn't change a bit. "And what the injection was that Pete gave me in Key West."

Dr. Gaynor smiled and waved a casual hand. "That was just a harmless sedative with which I had armed him for emergencies." Then he paused, apparently in thought. Giving me a puzzled look, he said, "What do you want to know about my injections for, Mr. Daybreak?"

I said, "Because I'm gambling you'll pay me more to keep quiet about *them* than about the blood tests."

His face did change then; it seemed to sink in upon its supporting bones. His voice was a mere whisper when he said, "You're talking in riddles, Mr. Daybreak."

"No, I'm not. Listen, how come you administer the same treatment to all your patients, no matter what their trouble is? Just a series of injections? Like for Smith, with palsy, and the guy with multiple sclerosis, and the girl with asthma? I've heard your injections cost a bundle too. So what am I going to think? I naturally figure you're shooting your patients full of some phony medicine, or maybe sugar water, at a hundred bucks a copy. A con, Doc. And a good one if you want to take advantage of sick people."

I touched a nerve there. Doc Gaynor leaped out of his chair and drew himself up to his full five feet. With curious dignity, he said, "That is not true, Mr. Daybreak." He raised his voice. "There is not one iota of truth in that!"

As though his voice had pulled a trigger, the door to my room snapped open and Pete came in, followed by Jerry. "Is he giving you trouble, Doc?" Pete asked with a sidelong glance at me.

"No, no," said Dr. Gaynor, although he was obviously glad they had joined us. "Let me handle this, please, boys. Mr. Daybreak is going to be quite reasonable . . ."

Jerry interrupted him. "He better be reasonable, or *I'll* handle it."

"Mr. Daybreak has no intention of revealing our little arrangement, Jerry," Gaynor said soothingly. "I can absolutely assure you of that—"

He was interrupted by a discreet knock on the door. Everybody in the room went as quiet as a circus tableau, including me. With only the briefest of pauses, the door was pulled open and Nurse Perry, preceded by a delectable odor of Lilies of the Valley, floated in.

"What do you want, Nurse?" Dr. Gaynor snapped. "I gave instructions that I wasn't to be disturbed here."

"I know," said Miss Perry, "but there are two men in your office who insist on seeing you at once."

"Who are they?"

"They wouldn't give their names to Miss Halborn."

"They'll have to wait then," said Doc brusquely. "Tell them I shan't be long."

Miss Perry looked down her nose at Pete and Jerry, then at me, as though she'd known all along that any friends of mine who came to visit me at the clinic would be crummy specimens. She said to Doc Gaynor in a level voice, "If I were you, Doctor, I'd see them now. I think they're from the State Health Department."

"What? Did they tell you that?"

"No. But I'm sure of it."

"How can you be?"

"I know who they are," she said. "One is a state medical examiner named Hugh Collins, and the other is Jamie O'Brien of the Bureau of Adult Health and Chronic Diseases."

Dead silence.

At length Doc Gaynor fixed an agitated gaze on the nurse. "You know their names. May I ask how?"

"They're colleagues of mine, Doctor," Constance Perry said calmly. "I asked them to come here today because our investigation of The Long Life Clinic is completed." She looked sorry for Dr. Gaynor. "I *am* sorry, Doctor," she apologized softly, "but I work for the Bureau too." She flushed a little. "You could call me a spy, I suppose."

Gaynor stared at her as though she were a Medusa who had turned him to stone. Then, gathering his wits, he said to Pete, "Stay here, and keep her with you until I find out if she's telling the truth." He darted to the door, pushed it open, and went out. The door whispered shut behind him.

"Bitch!" Jerry said, his eyes wild. In an excess of fury, he swept one muscular arm in an angry arc that brought his open hand in violent collision with the side of her head.

She staggered backward and collapsed in the corner of the room to the left of my bed.

"You stupid jerk!" Pete said in a poisonous voice "Lay off! You'll get us into real trouble!"

"She's a plant, Pete!" Jerry said. "She said so herself! She's gonna blow us wide open!"

"Shut up!" Pete ordered. "See if you've cracked her skull, dummy."

Jerry stepped over to her and squatted down to peer into her eyes.

Squatting there with his back to my bed, he was within easy reach of my arm—and too tempting a target to pass up. There was a heavy glass pitcher filled with water and ice cubes on the bedstand to my right. I took the pitcher by the handle and brought it up over my head and across the bed at the full stretch of my arm, like a basketball forward making a hook shot. The pitcher met Jerry's skull with a satisfying crash. Ice cubes and water and shards of broken glass went every which way. I hopped out of bed faster than Don Juan in a jam and tried to beat Pete to the door. It was only two steps, but I only just managed to make it. As he charged to escape, I let him have the jagged stump of the pitcher handle right in the middle of his beard. He backed off, his eyes darting desperately from me to the recumbent Jerry. His beard began to drip blood on the spotless floor.

Miss Perry stood up then, grasping the side of my bed to steady herself. I said, "Let this be a lesson to you, Miss Perry. Never trust an alcoholic with a pitcher of ice water."

As a reward for my splendid work with the water pitcher, Constance Perry agreed to have dinner with me the following evening at Galt Ocean Mile. The fact that I had confessed my true identity to her may have had something to do with it, but I preferred to think it was my great ice-water caper that won her over.

We sat side by side on a secluded banquette. She still smelled faintly of Lilies of the Valley and she looked even more delicious in a dress than in her nurse's uniform. When I asked her if she'd join me in a cocktail before dinner, she ordered a bourbon old-fashioned to go with my martini.

"I somehow suspected," she said, "right from the beginning, that you weren't really an alcoholic, Mr. Daybreak."

"I've always been a rotten actor. Why?"

"You were too good-tempered about the candy mints. And too relaxed about drying out. And you didn't suffer enough withdrawal symptoms."

"Shucks," I said, "you talk like a real nurse, Perry."

"I am. How do you think I got the job at the clinic?"

"Charmed your way in," I said and grinned at her. "Same as I drank my way in."



She smiled back, sipped her old-fashioned, and told me what had been happening since I saw her last. Pete and Jerry were in the local bastille, she reported, charged with assault, kidnapping, and blackmail. Dr. Gaynor was also in custody. And The Long Life Clinic had been closed down, the more seriously ill patients transferred to the municipal hospital. "I know you told me yesterday that you're a private investigator from Pittsburgh," she said. "But is your name really Elihu Daybreak?" She smothered a ladylike snicker.

I showed her my license. "Stop laughing," I said. "And call me Eli if it's easier for you."

"O.K. Eli. So now tell me how come a private investigator from Pittsburgh faked his way into The Long Life Clinic as an alcoholic."

"A rich drunk from Pittsburgh took a course of Doc Gaynor's injections last month at the clinic for his drinking problem," I said. "And all of a sudden, the rich drunk turned up dead. His brother, also rich, hired me to come down and take a look at the clinic because he suspected all was not kosher about his brother's death."

"I got involved for a similar reason. A fireman from Tampa was getting injections at the clinic last month for rejuvenation when he was suddenly transferred to the Miami Heart Institute, apparently having suffered a heart seizure of some kind. He died two days later. The medical examiner listed gas gangrene from Dr. Gaynor's injections as a cause of death. So the state began an investigation."

"With you as chief snooper?"

She nodded and finished her drink. I waved to the waiter and ordered us each another. "My Pittsburgh alcoholic also had gas gangrene present in his body at the time of death," I said. "Which leads me to hope you can enlighten me about the one thing I couldn't find out."

"The injections, you mean?"

"Yes. You must have discovered what they are. They've evidently caused fatal gangrene in two men."

"Two recently," she said. "Three altogether. Pete and Jerry were blackmailing Dr. Gaynor about the third death—a patient of his who died some years ago when he practiced in Havana."

"Are you going to tell me what the stuff is?"

She teased me. "That's part of our case against Dr. Gaynor and his clinic. But since you were kind enough to uncover all that silly business about the blood tests for us, I suppose it's only a fair exchange."

"Right. So tell me."

"Well, even as a nurse at the clinic, I couldn't get my hands on a sample until three days ago. And when we had it analyzed . . ." she shivered. "It turned out to be a serum made from the cells of fetal sheep. Brewed up, Dr. Gaynor says, by a New Zealand rancher to Gaynor's specifications."

"The cells of fetal sheep. Did Gaynor really think it helped his patients?"

"You bet. He's completely and utterly convinced of it. Once he got the bugs out of it—like its tendency to cause gas gangrene—he figured he'd have the greatest cure-all in the world. Until then, he knew he had to keep it a secret or we'd try to stop his work. Yesterday, when we faced him with it, he begged to be allowed to continue using the stuff for the good of the human race."

I remembered my first impression of Gaynor as a man who seemed to be looking beyond me, his patient, to some vision of perfect health only he could see. I said, "I think I believe that. I mean, that he's one-hundred-percent sincere. But he's nuts all the same."

Constance didn't smile. "Maybe," she said seriously. "But, Eli, the funny thing is that sheep-cell serum *does* help many human ailments to a surprising degree. The stuff retards degeneration, apparently, and does prove effective in the treatment of impotence and asthma and a lot of other things. Especially impotence."

"Yeah," I said, "I know all about the guy in Room 7 who wanted to prove that to you personally."

She colored. Then she said, "In a way I feel sorry for Doctor Gaynor, Eli."

"Why?"

"Well, he'll catch it from all sides now—more punishment than he really deserves if you take his motives into consideration. The state of Florida will work him over for involuntary manslaughter and extortion. The Federal Drug Administration will get on his back. And the American Medical Association will expel him and hound him to death if the rest of us don't."

"That's only the beginning," I said. "When I turn in my report to my client, Doc Gaynor will find himself slapped with the biggest malpractice suit of the century."

We were silent for a moment, both feeling faintly ashamed of what

we had done to Dr. Gaynor, then I turned in my seat to look at Nurse Perry. I regarded the tender curve of her cheek and the tilt of her nose. "Miss Perry," I said, "all this business about blood tests has given me an idea. When I go back to Pennsylvania, why don't you come with me? We can take a blood test together."

She stared at me as though I'd taken leave of my senses. "Pennsylvania?" she said. "Blood tests? What for?"

"Legal and legitimate blood tests," I said. "To tell us what our chances are of contracting, within days, a very contagious disease."

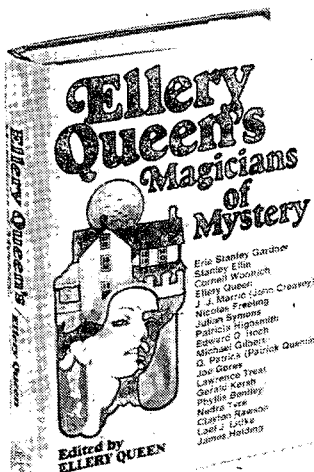
"What disease?"

"Matrimony," I said, looking her straight in the eye. "Will you think about it, Miss Perry?"

She gave me a strange look. "All right, Eli," she said, "but let's have dinner first, shall we? I'm starving." She reached for the menus and we studied them.

"Daybreak," she muttered dubiously. "Constance Daybreak. . ."

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